

Education and Gender: The Role of Christianity in Social Transformation in Northeast India with reference to the Hill Districts of Manipur.

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Abstract

Christianity has played a pivotal role in shaping education and gender equality in Northeast India, particularly in the Hill Districts of Manipur. Before the arrival of Christian missionaries in the late 19th century, tribal communities followed indigenous belief systems, and formal education was largely absent. Missionary efforts introduced Western education, leading to increased literacy rates and the establishment of schools that transformed tribal societies. A significant contribution of Christianity was the promotion of female education, which challenged the traditional patriarchal structures and provided women with greater social and economic opportunities. The impact of Christianity on tribal communities in Manipur is profound. Besides fostering literacy, Christian institutions have played a key role in empowering women through education, leadership, and social participation. However, challenges remain, including deep-rooted patriarchal norms, resistance to cultural change, and socio-economic barriers that hinder women's advancement. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach, including strengthening educational infrastructure, promoting gender-inclusive policies, and fostering collaboration between religious and governmental organizations to sustain the progress initiated by Christian missionary efforts.

Key words: Christian Missionary Education, Gender Equality, Tribal Society, Women Leaderships, Socio-economic Development, Indigenous belief System and Policy recommendation.

Introduction

Northeast India is a diverse region comprising eight states, each with distinct ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities. It is home to over 200 indigenous tribes, each with unique traditions, governance systems, and socio-economic practices. The region's geography, characterized by hills and valleys, has played a crucial role in shaping its socio-political landscape. Manipur, one of the northeastern states, has a unique composition with the Meitei community predominantly residing in the valley, while the hill districts are inhabited by various tribal groups, including the Kuki, Naga, and Zomi. The hill tribes traditionally

practiced subsistence agriculture, shifting cultivation, and community-based governance. They followed customary laws, with village chiefs or council members playing a central role in decision-making. The social structure of these tribal communities was largely patriarchal, with gender roles defined by traditional customs. Women played vital roles in domestic affairs, agriculture, and handicrafts but were largely excluded from formal leadership positions. Education, in the pre-Christian era, was primarily informal and oral, passed down through folklore, rituals, and customary practices.

Role of Indigenous Belief Systems before Christian Missionary Intervention

Before the arrival of Christian missionaries in the late 19th century, the tribal communities of the Hill Districts of Manipur followed indigenous animistic belief systems deeply rooted in nature worship, ancestor reverence, and spiritual rituals. These belief systems were central to their way of life and governed social structures, traditions, and moral codes.

- a. **Animism and Nature Worship:** Tribal communities in the Hill Districts of Manipur traditionally practiced animism, believing that spirits resided in natural elements such as rivers, mountains, and forests. These spirits were considered protectors or harbingers of misfortune, influencing daily life and social practices. To maintain harmony with these spiritual forces, rituals and sacrifices—often involving animals—were performed by village elders or priests. These ceremonies aimed to seek blessings, protection, and ensure the well-being of the community.
- b. **Ancestor Worship:** Many tribes in the Hill Districts of Manipur believed that ancestral spirits played a vital role in guiding and protecting their descendants. These spirits were revered, and their blessings were sought for prosperity and protection. To honor the deceased, tribes conducted rituals and feasts, often involving offerings of food and animal sacrifices. Such ceremonies reinforced social bonds and upheld traditional customs across generations.

I. Sacrificial Rituals and Priesthood:

Religious ceremonies in the Hill Districts of Manipur often involved animal sacrifices to deities, a practice believed to ensure divine favor, fertility, and protection from misfortunes. Traditional priests or village elders, regarded as spiritual intermediaries, conducted these rituals, determining the appropriate offerings and interpreting omens. Beyond their religious significance, these ceremonies also played a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion, reinforcing tribal customs, and strengthening communal decision-making processes.

II. Moral and Social Codes: Customary laws, upheld by village councils, governed social conduct, marriage norms, and conflict resolution in tribal societies. These unwritten laws, passed down through generations, played a vital role in maintaining harmony and order within the community. Village elders served as key decision-makers, ensuring justice and preserving traditional values while adapting to changing social dynamics over time. While these indigenous belief systems fostered social cohesion, they also had limitations, such as rigid social hierarchies and gender disparities. Women had little access to formal decision-making, and education was limited to oral traditions. The arrival of Christianity disrupted these traditional structures by introducing Western education, written literacy, and new religious values that reshaped gender roles, governance, and community development in the Hill Districts of Manipur.

Statement of the Problem Christianity has played a transformative role in shaping education and gender dynamics in Northeast India, particularly in the Hill Districts of Manipur. Before the arrival of Christian missionaries, formal education was nearly absent, and indigenous tribal societies followed patriarchal structures where women had limited access to education and leadership roles. Missionary efforts introduced literacy, Western-style education, and new social values that gradually challenged traditional gender norms. Despite these advancements, gender disparities persist, and socio-economic challenges hinder equal opportunities in education and leadership. Understanding Christianity's role in this transformation is crucial for evaluating its impact on tribal communities, identifying existing challenges, and proposing strategies for sustainable development. This study aims to assess the historical and contemporary influence of Christianity on education and gender equality, offering insights for future policy interventions.

Objective of the Study:

1. To examine the impact of Christian missionary education on literacy and socio-economic development in the Hill Districts of Manipur, particularly its role in increasing access to formal education among tribal communities.
2. To analyze Christianity's influence on gender roles and women's empowerment, focusing on changes in female literacy rates, leadership opportunities, and social participation in church and community governance.
3. To identify challenges and propose strategies for sustainable development, addressing issues such as patriarchal resistance, limited higher education access for women, and socio-cultural tensions between Christianity and indigenous traditions.

Research Questions:

- a. How has Christianity influenced literacy and education?
- b. What impact has it had on gender roles and equality?
- c. What are the challenges and future prospects?

Literature Review

Christian missionaries played a crucial role in introducing Western education to Northeast India, particularly in the Hill Districts of Manipur. Early studies, such as Downs (1992) and Lalsangkima (2007), highlight how missionary efforts led to increased literacy rates among tribal communities. The establishment of mission schools provided access to formal education, replacing indigenous oral traditions with structured learning.

Scholars like Shimray (2009) argue that missionary education not only imparted literacy but also introduced modern socio-political awareness among tribal groups.

Contemporary research examines the long-term impact of missionary education. For instance, Kamei (2013) discusses the expansion of higher education in Christian-majority areas, emphasizing its role in economic mobility.

However, some scholars, such as Longkumer (2018), critique the imposition of Western ideals, arguing that missionary education sometimes undermined indigenous knowledge systems and traditional governance structures.

Christianity's influence on gender equality has been widely studied. Scholars like Zawla (2005) and Haokip (2015) highlight how missionary education encouraged women's literacy, challenging patriarchal norms. Christian institutions established girls' schools, creating opportunities for female participation in leadership and professional fields. Women's organizations within churches also contributed to social change, as noted by Kipgen (2020)

However, despite progress, studies indicate that gender disparities remain. Rongmei (2017) points out that while Christianity promoted female education, traditional gender roles still persist in many tribal communities.

Moreover, Lalhrualtuanga (2021) suggests that although women have gained educational access, their representation in church leadership and decision-making remains limited. Overall, the literature demonstrates that Christianity has had a profound impact on education and gender equality in Manipur's tribal societies, yet challenges continue to hinder full gender equity and indigenous knowledge preservation

Key Gaps in Literature

While existing studies highlight Christianity's impact on education and gender transformation in Northeast India, several gaps remain. Most research focuses on missionary efforts and institutional developments, but grassroots perspectives—how tribal women and marginalized groups personally experienced these changes—are underexplored. Additionally, studies primarily emphasize historical transformations, with limited research on contemporary challenges such as economic barriers, employment disparities, and gender representation in leadership roles within Christian institutions. Further, there is a lack of comparative studies examining Christian-influenced and non-Christian tribal communities to assess differences in educational access and gender roles. Addressing these gaps will provide a more comprehensive understanding of Christianity's role in shaping social structures in Manipur's Hill Districts.

Early Missionary Efforts in Northeast India and Manipur

Christian missionaries played a crucial role in introducing Western education in Northeast India, particularly in the Hill Districts of Manipur. Among the most influential missions were the American Baptist Mission, Welsh Presbyterian Mission, and the Roman Catholic Church, each contributing to literacy, formal education, and social transformation.

1. The American Baptist Mission

The American Baptist Mission (ABM) was one of the first missionary groups to introduce Western education to the tribal communities of Northeast India. Arriving in Assam in the early 19th century, Baptist missionaries later expanded their activities to Manipur. They emphasized vernacular literacy, translating the Bible into local dialects and establishing mission schools. The Baptist Church played a significant role in promoting education among the Kuki and Naga tribes, encouraging literacy and religious teachings simultaneously. The mission also supported female education, breaking traditional gender barriers by enrolling girls in schools.

2. The Welsh Presbyterian Mission

The Welsh Presbyterian Mission arrived in Manipur in the late 19th century and made significant educational contributions, particularly among the Zeliangrong and other hill tribes. They emphasized structured schooling, teacher training, and the establishment of theological institutions. Unlike the Baptists, the Presbyterians focused on community-based education,

integrating local traditions with Christian teachings. The mission also encouraged women's literacy, a radical shift from traditional patriarchal norms.

3. The Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church, though a late entrant compared to Protestant missions, played a substantial role in education by setting up boarding schools, vocational training centers, and healthcare institutions. Their mission schools were particularly known for providing structured primary and secondary education. Catholics also introduced technical and vocational education, offering skill-based learning that helped tribal communities achieve economic independence. Together, these missions laid the foundation for modern education in Manipur, significantly impacting literacy rates and gender dynamics. Growth of Literacy and Establishment of Schools (Literacy Rates Before and After Missionary Intervention)

Before the arrival of Christian missionaries, formal education in the Hill Districts of Manipur was largely absent. Literacy was limited to oral traditions, storytelling, and indigenous knowledge systems. There were no written scripts for many tribal languages, and education was informal, passed down through folklore and rituals. With the advent of Christian missionary efforts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, literacy rates saw a significant rise. Missionaries introduced vernacular scripts, Bible translations, and structured schooling, leading to increased education levels, especially among marginalized tribal communities.

- a. Pre-Missionary Period (Before 1894): Literacy was estimated to be below 5% among hill tribes, with little to no formal schooling.
- b. Post-Missionary Period (1951 Census): Literacy among hill tribes increased to 36.1% due to missionary-led educational initiatives.
- c. Contemporary Literacy Rates: As of 2011, literacy in the tribal-dominated hill areas of Manipur stands at 66.5%, demonstrating the long-term impact of Christian educational institutions.

Case Studies of Key Missionary-Established Institutions in Manipur

1. Mission Schools by the American Baptist Mission

- a. The Ukhrul Mission School, established in the early 1900s, played a pivotal role in providing formal education to the Tangkhul Naga community. Before its establishment, education was primarily informal, relying on oral traditions and indigenous knowledge systems.

- b. The school emphasized vernacular literacy and biblical studies, enabling students to read and write in their native language while gaining exposure to Christian teachings. Over time, this foundation contributed to higher education development among the Nagas, fostering literacy, social awareness, and leadership that would later shape the community's engagement in modern education and governance.

2. The Welsh Presbyterian Mission Schools

- a. The Churachandpur Mission School, established in 1910, played a crucial role in educating the Kuki community. It provided formal education, biblical teachings, and vocational training, significantly improving literacy rates and creating opportunities for social mobility among the Kukis in the Hill Districts of Manipur.
- b. The Churachandpur Mission School actively promoted female education, empowering Kuki women to pursue teaching and leadership roles in their communities. By providing formal education, the school helped break traditional gender barriers, enabling women to contribute to social, religious, and educational development in the region.

3. Catholic Mission Schools

- a. The Don Bosco Schools established by the Roman Catholic Church in the mid-20th century introduced technical and vocational training, contributing to employment opportunities for tribal youth.

These institutions played a critical role in transforming education and literacy in Manipur's tribal regions.

Christianity's Role in Gender Equality

Traditional Gender Roles in Tribal Societies: Pre-Christian Patriarchal Structures

Before the introduction of Christianity, tribal societies in Manipur and other parts of Northeast India followed patriarchal social structures where gender roles were rigidly defined. Women were primarily responsible for household duties, child-rearing, and agricultural labor, while men dominated village councils, religious ceremonies, and decision-making processes. In most tribal communities, education for women was non-existent, as formal learning was not a priority. Knowledge was passed down orally, often focusing on agriculture, folklore, and rituals rather than literacy or academic skills. Customary laws also reinforced male authority, with property inheritance, political leadership, and religious roles

exclusively reserved for men. Women had minimal representation in village councils and were expected to conform to traditional norms that limited their participation in public life.

Christian Influence on Women's Education

The arrival of Christian missionaries challenged the existing gender norms by introducing formal education, which was initially aimed at boys but gradually extended to girls. Mission schools played a transformative role in increasing female literacy and empowering women to step beyond their traditional roles.

1. Increase in Female Literacy Rates

1. Before missionary intervention, female literacy was less than 1% in most hill districts of Manipur.
2. By the 1951 Census, literacy among tribal women had increased to 12%, marking the beginning of formal education for women.
3. In contemporary times, literacy among women in the hill districts has risen to over 60%, a direct result of missionary-led educational reforms.

2. Formation of Women's Organizations within Churches

- a. Christianity not only encouraged literacy but also provided women with platforms for leadership through church-based organizations.
- b. Women's fellowships and Christian women's associations played a vital role in community development, social work, and advocacy for gender equality.
- c. These organizations focused on women's rights, economic empowerment, and family welfare, helping women transition into active community participants.

3. Political and Social Participation: Women in Church and Community Leadership

Christianity's influence extended beyond education, encouraging women to participate in governance and decision-making. This shift is evident in three key areas:

1. Women in Church Leadership

- a. Before Christian influence, religious roles were strictly male-dominated, but church structures allowed women to take active roles in administration and teaching.
- b. Women began serving as Sunday school teachers, pastors' assistants, and leaders of church organizations.

- c. In some denominations, women have even become ordained ministers, challenging traditional gender roles.

2. Women in Community Governance

- a. Christian education provided women with legal awareness and leadership skills, enabling them to participate in village decision-making councils.
- b. Although male dominance remains in formal political structures, Christian-influenced women's groups have contributed to policy discussions on education, health, and social welfare.

3. Advocacy for Gender Rights

- a. The establishment of Christian women's organizations helped in advocating for gender reforms, including property rights, educational access, and social justice.
- b. Many tribal women have since emerged as political leaders, educators, and activists, working towards equality and empowerment in their communities.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite the transformative impact of Christianity on education and gender equality in the Hill Districts of Manipur, several challenges and limitations persist. While missionary efforts have contributed to social change, deeply rooted patriarchal norms, socio-economic barriers, and resistance from traditional leaders continue to hinder full gender equality and educational access.

1. Persistence of Patriarchy Despite Christian Influence

Although Christianity introduced new gender perspectives and encouraged female education, traditional patriarchal structures remain strong in many tribal societies. Men continue to dominate leadership roles in churches, politics, and village governance. While women have gained access to education and employment, their participation in decision-making processes is still limited.

- a. In many church denominations, leadership roles such as pastors and elders are still overwhelmingly male-dominated. Women often serve in supporting roles rather than in primary leadership positions.
- b. Traditional customs that favor male inheritance of property and decision-making power continue to influence gender roles, even within Christian communities.

- c. Domestic responsibilities remain largely assigned to women, limiting their ability to pursue careers or engage in political leadership.

Thus, while Christianity has challenged patriarchal norms to some extent, deeply embedded cultural beliefs continue to restrict women's full empowerment.

2. Limited Higher Education Access for Rural Women

While missionary schools have significantly improved primary and secondary education for girls, access to higher education remains a challenge, especially in rural areas. Several factors contribute to this limitation:

- a. Geographical barriers: Many remote villages lack higher educational institutions, forcing students to travel long distances or relocate, which is financially and socially challenging for women.
- b. Economic constraints: Many families prioritize sons' education over daughters', believing that investing in boys will bring greater economic returns. Women are often encouraged to marry early rather than pursue university degrees.
- c. Lack of representation in higher education institutions: Few women from tribal communities attain positions of academic leadership, leading to a lack of role models for younger generations.

These limitations restrict women's ability to compete for professional careers, reducing their influence in decision-making roles in society.

3. Resistance from Traditional Leaders in Preserving Indigenous Customs

The introduction of Christianity has often been met with resistance from tribal leaders, who view it as a threat to indigenous customs and traditions. While Christianity has modernized aspects of tribal life, it has also led to cultural tensions in several ways:

- a. Traditional leaders argue that Christian teachings undermine indigenous religious practices, leading to a loss of identity and cultural heritage.
- b. Some elders resist changes in gender roles, believing that women's increasing education and autonomy disrupt traditional family structures.
- c. Efforts to integrate gender equality policies within village governance often face opposition from male-dominated councils, who prioritize customary laws over modern legal frameworks.

This resistance creates a barrier to progressive reforms, particularly in areas where tribal identity is closely linked to patriarchal customs.

4. Socio-Economic Barriers Hindering Further Progress

Even as Christianity promotes education and gender equality, many women continue to face economic and social barriers that prevent them from fully benefiting from these changes. Key challenges include:

- a. **Poverty and unemployment:** Many tribal families struggle with economic hardship, making education a lower priority, especially for girls.
- b. **Early marriage and gender expectations:** Despite Christian teachings on equality, social pressure for women to marry early and prioritize family life over careers remains strong.
- c. **Limited employment opportunities for educated women:** Even when women attain higher education, job opportunities in tribal regions remain scarce, leading to underemployment or migration to urban areas.

Christianity's Role in Gender Equality: (Traditional Gender Roles in Tribal Societies: Pre-Christian Patriarchal Structures) Before the introduction of Christianity, tribal societies in Manipur and other parts of Northeast India followed patriarchal social structures where gender roles were rigidly defined. Women were primarily responsible for household duties, child-rearing, and agricultural labor, while men dominated village councils, religious ceremonies, and decision-making processes. In most tribal communities, education for women was non-existent, as formal learning was not a priority. Knowledge was passed down orally, often focusing on agriculture, folklore, and rituals rather than literacy or academic skills. Customary laws also reinforced male authority, with property inheritance, political leadership, and religious roles exclusively reserved for men. Women had minimal representation in village councils and were expected to conform to traditional norms that limited their participation in public life.

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- c. In some denominations, women have even become ordained ministers, challenging traditional gender roles.

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- b. Although male dominance remains in formal political structures, Christian-influenced women's groups have contributed to policy discussions on education, health, and social welfare.

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- b. Many tribal women have since emerged as political leaders, educators, and activists, working towards equality and empowerment in their communities

The Way Forward: Recommendations for Sustainable Development

Despite the progress brought by Christian missionary efforts in education and gender equality, challenges persist. To ensure sustainable development in the Hill Districts of Manipur, a multi-faceted approach is necessary. Strengthening educational infrastructure, enhancing women's leadership, promoting interfaith collaboration, and implementing economic empowerment programs will be key to fostering long-term progress.

1. Strengthening Educational Infrastructure

Expanding access to quality education is critical for sustaining gender equality and social transformation. Several measures can be taken:

- a. Expanding Higher Education Institutions: Establishing more colleges and vocational training centers in rural areas will ensure that women and youth have access to tertiary education and skill development programs.
- b. Enhancing Scholarship Programs: Government and church-sponsored scholarships should be expanded to support underprivileged students, particularly rural women, to pursue higher education.
- c. Upgrading School Facilities: Many missionary-established schools lack proper infrastructure. Investment in modern classrooms, libraries, and digital learning tools will improve the quality of education.
- d. Encouraging Bilingual Education: Strengthening vernacular and English-language education will help students retain cultural identity while preparing them for broader opportunities.

2. Enhancing Women's Leadership in Churches and Society

Despite increased female literacy, women's leadership in churches and community governance remains limited. Encouraging greater participation is crucial.

- a. Church Reforms for Gender-Inclusive Leadership: Many churches still restrict women's roles in leadership. Encouraging policy changes within church organizations can help women take on pastoral, administrative, and decision-making positions.

- b. Training Women for Leadership Roles: Organizing capacity-building workshops on leadership, governance, and social activism will empower women to take up roles in community development and politics.
- c. Strengthening Women's Fellowships and Associations: Expanding the work of church-based women's organizations will provide platforms for women to advocate for social change and gender equality.

3. Encouraging Interfaith Collaboration to Bridge Cultural Differences:

Religious and cultural tensions often emerge in Christian-influenced tribal societies due to the displacement of indigenous traditions. Promoting interfaith dialogue can help address these challenges:

- a. Creating Platforms for Cultural Exchange: Churches, traditional institutions, and government bodies should collaborate to foster understanding between Christian and indigenous groups.
- b. Integrating Cultural Heritage in Christian Education: Schools and churches should incorporate traditional values, folklore, and history alongside Christian teachings to preserve indigenous identity.
- c. Encouraging Respect for Customary Laws: Balancing Christian values with tribal customary laws will help in promoting harmony between religious and cultural identities.

4. Economic Empowerment Programs for Women

Economic independence is key to sustaining gender equality. Women need greater access to financial resources, skills training, and entrepreneurship opportunities.

- a. Microfinance and Self-Help Groups (SHGs): Expanding church-supported microfinance programs will enable women to start small businesses, reducing economic dependency.
- b. Vocational Training Centers: Establishing skill development centers focused on tailoring, handicrafts, agriculture, and digital literacy will enhance employability.
- c. Encouraging Women's Cooperatives: Promoting cooperative societies among women will strengthen their financial independence and community engagement.

Conclusion

Sustainable development in the Hill Districts of Manipur requires a collaborative approach involving churches, government agencies, and civil society organizations. Strengthening education, women's leadership, interfaith harmony, and economic empowerment will ensure

long-term gender equality and social transformation in Christian-influenced tribal communities.

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