

## **Missionary Travel Literature and the Representation of Assam**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper critically studies the Missionary Travel Literature on Assam and the representation of the native in the narratives. The paper is an attempt to understand the different factors that contributed to the shaping of the narratives of Missionary Literature on Assam. In fact, the paper argues that the Missionary Literature was an endeavour to put an end to all the conflicts that had taken place between the Mission and the government. At the same time, the paper also explores the differences within the Mission itself and the nuances in the narratives of the authors.*

**Keywords: Assam Mission, Missionary Literature, Representations, Native, Colonialist.**

This paper attempts at a critical understanding of the Missionary travel literature on Assam from a postcolonial standpoint based on the reading of three texts - Mrs. Mildred Marston's *Korno Siga, The Mountain Chief or Life in Assam* (1889), Ellen Elizabeth Vickland's *With Christ in Assam* (1925), and O. L. Swanson's *In Villages and Tea Gardens* (1944). It aims at exploring the political agents working behind the Mission and how they influenced its literature. The paper will analyse how the Missionary authors assert religious hegemony over the natives and thereby promote colonial hegemony at large. It will also examine different political factors that helped in the shaping of the narratives of Missionary Literature on Assam. At the same time, the paper

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will also explore and observe the nuances in the writings in terms of the representation of both the natives and the colonials. In fact, the paper is an exploration of the poetics and politics of Missionary literature on Assam.

The Assam Mission of the American Baptist Missionaries, initially called the Shan Mission, started in 1836 with the arrival of Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter at Sadiya in Upper Assam. The most important instrument that they were equipped with was the printing press which was indeed a foreign technology to the natives of Assam. It was in their exertion that the Assamese language took its standard form for which the Assamese community has been indebted to them till date and the intelligentsia acknowledges the same. Nevertheless, it is an established fact that the arrival of the American Baptist missionaries in Assam was not a sudden happening but the well-planned step taken by the colonial government as part of its policies. On this subject what Elizabeth Vickland puts in her book is important to note: 'In the early days before law and order had been established in the province there was a great deal of trouble on the frontiers. The agents of Britain realized that there was a need of a great steadying influence, so the Commissioner of Assam sent an appeal to the Baptists in Calcutta for missionaries. This appeal was sent to the American Baptist Mission in Burma, and two missionaries were sent in answer.'(Vickland, 108-109) The government needed a way to overcome that 'trouble' and they found one. Adam White, in David Scott's memoir states that the colonial policy was to convert the natives into Christianity by adding certain efforts for their welfare which would fill their hearts with gratitude to the missionaries and thereby to the Europeans. Thus the connection of the missionaries and their activities with the administration was very significant and intriguing as well. There was a covenant between the two and the 'selfless' efforts of the missionaries can be aptly interpreted as attempts to attain both cultural and religious hegemony in order to achieve colonial hegemony. This is evident in works of many missionaries writing on Assam and the select texts for discussion are among them.

All the three authors under discussion were Baptist missionaries coming to Assam at different phases of the colonial period with a common interest. Their texts are but vignettes of religious activities and accomplishments that the missionaries had been doing in the native social sphere during that time. Those were in fact deliberate attempts to ascertain the superiority of Christianity over other religions. And to arrive at that both Marston and Vickland tend towards 'showing' whereas Swanson seeks help of 'telling'.

The method that the Missionary literature applied in its narrative is that of compare and contrast and of persuasion. The authors attempt at focusing on the worst of the native's religion but on the best of their own. In *With Christ in Assam*, Vickland depicts the native country as a place which is at the worst of its condition and that it needs redemption. Vickland's understanding of Assam/India and America/Europe is based on binarism — brown-gold, ugly-beautiful, clamorous-serene, dirty-clean, heathenism-Christianity, ignorance-wisdom, etc. She feels that in 'brown' India Christ is the golden light. Vickland compares the image of Christ with those of Hindu Gods and Goddesses; her selection of Jagannath and Kali for this comparison is rather tactful which helps her in criticizing the Hindu people for worshipping 'ugly deformity' as their Gods. Vickland describes her visit to two important Hindu shrines in Calcutta and Banaras. She gives chaotic pictures of the two places as full of dirty and ragged people. She criticizes the society as strange and their affairs as weird. Contrastingly, she gives a picture of the Christian society along with its God as characterized by cleanliness and peacefulness. Opposite the disorderliness found in Hindu holy places there is serenity in the Christian Church. And most importantly, Christianity is shown as full of wisdom against the ignorance of Hinduism. According to her, Hinduism is a 'non understandable philosophy' (Vickland, 87) and therefore not suitable for the people. To prove her point right Vickland quotes from a Hindu poet where the author calls himself too small to understand the grand mystery of the Creator. Vickland gives sarcastic comments that in a religion where the great poets are 'ignorant' there can be no hope

for the common people. She calls the Indian ‘an orphaned child – lonely, hungry, full of fear lifting its hands in prayer to the vast sky’ (Vickland, 72) and therefore it needed the patronage of Christianity.

Similar attitude is seen in Marston too although in a mitigated way. Marston seems to be fond of the people she had been working with. She thinks that the people were in darkness and it was her duty to illumine their minds with the help of the gospel. To illustrate this she gives a framed account of a native convert, Korno Siga who tells his story in the first person narrative. Korno Siga narrates how he has been disillusioned with different religious faiths. Disappointed by his community faith he approaches a Hindu priest who turns out to be a cruel fraud. Then he goes to a Mohammedan teacher but only to get dissatisfied. Finally, he comes to the Marstons and finds peace in Christianity through conversion. By depicting other such characters that came to embrace Christianity Marston shows the superiority as well as the triumph of her religion over other faiths. The author also creates a plot where she could defend her religion against Buddhism. This was rather an attack on Buddhism. It is interesting to note that Marston gives a logistic to establish the superiority of Christianity over Buddhism. Unlike other religious faiths, it was difficult to find ills in Buddhism and therefore Marston gives special attention to that.

In the third text under discussion, the author, Swanson adopts a differing attitude as he does not seem to stick to the one sole aim of establishing the superiority of Christianity. Undoubtedly, like Vickland and Marston, he too celebrates the triumph of their religion but simultaneously Swanson talks about interesting things about the Mission as well. He pities the other religious faiths along with the ignorance of the people and gives in detail the description of some native converts who lost faith in their own gods. But at the same time Swanson hints at the intra-conflicts in the Mission. In fact, his narrative seems a bit more realistic than the other two as it is devoid of the kind of religious sentiment that fills the narratives of both Vickland and Marston.

The most important aspect that the Missionary writings focused on was the 'ignorance' of the natives. In fact, it served as a consistent point to the missionaries in support of promoting Christian education. The missionaries had the impression that the mind of the native was in darkness. Hinduism was rather creating confusion. They tried to convince the people that the only way to remove that darkness was through the light of Christ coupled with a Christian education. Their focus seems to be on the evils of Hinduism and the great role played by Christianity in removing those from the native society. That was indeed a defense of the Christian religious education in the schools of Assam. However, it is important to note that the Christian Mission was successful mostly among the hill tribes and the socially marginalized faction of people in Assam. The Hindu and the Islamic, as Adam White calls them the 'races further advanced' (White, 7), were not easily influenced by the missionaries. Swanson in his narrative mentions very clearly that his efforts did not work among the high caste and the educated people. He admits,

I mentioned my failure in reaching the Indian gentlemen, or *Babus*, as we usually call them. The shrewd lawyers, the unscrupulous traders, the proud Brahmins, the worldly minded Indians who served the British government, the young and impatient students eager to bring in reform but refusing to taste the power of Christ; to these and many others I had often spoken, but my words had not achieved any visible results. (Swanson, 175)

The Mission, therefore, concentrated on the people who were victims of both poverty and casteism. In fact, in the 1840s, there was Hindu opposition towards the activities of the missionaries for which the public officers of the colonial government were directed to abstain from supporting the missionary effort. Therefore, the missionaries had to work with the socially marginalized who were at the same time victims of illiteracy and poverty. Theirs was an endeavour to win the hearts of this class of people by showing charity. In fact, that was one of the persuasive methods of the

missionaries about which Adam White too mentions clearly in his book. In Vickland's account, we see that the natives converted to Christianity with the hope of improving their material condition. Marston's hero Korno Siga too was a feeble and diseased character and therefore was marginalized in his own community where a man's social dignity to a large extent had depended on his physical strength. When he was attacked by cholera and treated to recovery by the missionaries it was a new life for him. In a way, the missionaries did something which according to people like Korno Siga only the gods could do. Marston says, 'After his recovery he was so grateful that he seemed unable to do enough for us.' (Marston, 93) The technologically advanced Westerners with their scientific inventions were almost heavenly figures for the then socially marginalized illiterate people. Christianity gave them a new way of living and upgraded their living conditions. Therefore, it will be not wrong to say that most of the people got converted not because of their faith in the gospels but because of the foreign experience which they could have from their contact with those foreigners. As Marston says 'many a faithful native workers in India today owes his or her Christianization to a slipper!' (Marston, 64)

A remarkable point to note is that in their discussion on the ignorance and the poor state of the natives the missionaries never talked about education in general minus the religion. While talking about the condition of the natives, they even tend to overlook the fact that the British came to Assam at such a time when the whole region was yet to overcome the disaster that had been brought to them by the Burmese invasions. At that time it was a community whose spine was broken and which was suffering in penury, and the British administration was of no help in the betterment of the same. In fact, the peasant class was suffering more under the revenue and taxation levied by the new government. It was therefore the darkness of poverty and illiteracy rather than religion which were impeding progress in the society. The clamor and disorderliness that Vickland depicts or the ignorance that Marston and Swanson talk about are in fact the characteristics of any poverty ridden society.

However, the missionary focus was never on these issues, rather they interpreted it as a result of the absence of Christ in the region. They gave emphasis on the need of the Christian faith or light rather than on the removal of illiteracy and poverty from the society. And if they had ever referred to these matters they always assured their readers and themselves that those weaknesses could be removed from the society but with the help of Christian education only. It was their belief that ‘the people are in bondage; only Jesus can set them free.’ (Vickland, 162)

Along with Christian education the Missionary literature promoted the Christian Government too. Both Vickland and Marston praise the British government for eradicating ills from the society. They draw attention to the ills in Hinduism such as human sacrifices before the shrine of Hindu gods and goddesses and show their appreciation for the government’s exertion in removing those from the society. Although both Vickland and Marston focused on the darkness in the region and criticize the natives for that both the authors have soft tones while talking about the native converts as they were the people who contributed towards the success of the Mission by responding in positive to the preaching of the missionaries. They present before the readers one Mission consisting of white philanthropists who were disseminating light in the dark. In fact, theirs are narratives that celebrate the success of the Mission. Contrary to that Swanson’s narrative gives us information about other things as well which are noteworthy. Unlike them, he does not present before the readers one Mission but gives idea about the conflict between different sects and Churches within the Christian religious community – German Mission, English Mission, Baptists, Non-Baptists, etc. He also talks about the disputes amongst the missionaries regarding their views on the ways of doing their works. It is quite shocking when he tells us about the status of the natives and compares them with the black slaves of the US. ‘In some ways they were much like the slaves on our southern plantations, except that they were not sold or mistreated.’ (Swanson, 56) Swanson in many ways seems to be different from Vickland

and Marston. When both Vickland and Marston show only the success of the Mission, Swanson talks about the failures as well. It is from him that we come to know the fact that the Mission could not inspire confidence in the educated and the people belonging to the higher class in the society. Nevertheless, this differing attitude and tone in the narratives also has to do a lot with the differences in the missionaries and their social stratum. Swanson was a Swedish migrant who got shelter in the US and he himself was a marginalized in the group of American missionaries and they were distinguished, unofficially though, as the Swedish Baptist group in Assam. He admits that he had found it difficult to get assimilated with the carefree yet mechanical American society. He also mentions that while he and his two companions were in Chicago, they looked up to the English speaking students as their superiors in every way. Therefore, it was obvious that his observations and acceptance of both the missionaries and their conducts vary from that of other American missionaries like Vickland and Marston.

However, disputes were not only amongst the missionaries but between the Mission and the government too. It is pertinent to note that the Shan Mission or Assam Mission started as a Colonialist propaganda but eventually conflicts started taking place between the two on issues such as religion and language. The missionaries had to move from station to station because of the ferocious aggression of the hill tribes and in the plains also they faced opposition from the dominant religious community. The mutiny of 1857 made the matter worse as the government got the impression that the religious activities of the Mission to a great extent had fueled the mutiny and therefore it stopped any kind of assistance to the missionaries. Moreover, the missionary position on the vernacular issue of Assam too was against the British policy which widened the distance between the two. A few years later, at the request of the Mission, the government loosened the rigidity and allowed some financial help to the missionaries, without denouncing the official policy of neutrality in religious matters.<sup>1</sup> These political happenings influenced the missionary literature of the later period and the authors seem



to be defending their points of views on matters like vernacular language and the need of Christian education. In many of the missionary accounts, while talking about the language and culture of the natives, authors like Marston and Susan Ward tried to establish a strong difference between the Assamese and the Bengali language. Marston's comparing the similarities between the two languages with those between French and Italian is noteworthy. However, they never forget to mention the essentiality of the British government; in fact, people like Susan Ward were standing for 'a benign Christian government' (Ward, 19). The missionary mouthpiece, *Arunodoi Sambad Patra* (first appeared in 1846)—later known as "Arunodoi"—which was also the first newspaper/magazine in the Assamese language played a vital role in boosting the missionary standpoint. Although called a secular magazine, *Arunodoi* in reality endeavored to show the importance of the Christian religion. The native converts too had their share in that venture of the Mission. The Mission Society had sent Assamese converts to the US and published their experiences in *Arunodoi*. In the August issue of 1849, "Letter from Lucien Hayden" appeared which informed about experiencing the New World by a native convert. The letter was in fact a comparison between the vastness of the outside world which was far advanced and the smallness of the native land focusing mainly on the ignorance of the native people. The traveler, however, emphasizes the importance of English education as remedy. In the same issue "Visit of two Assamese to America" was published which tells of two men from Nowgong—Dhaniram and Sivram—who visited the US with some Baptist missionaries. Narrated in the first person and sometimes in the third person narrative (by the editor possibly) the letter was of similar nature to that of Hayden regarding the content. The receipt of a second letter from Dhaniram and Sivram is mentioned in "Letter from James Tripp" which was published in the November issue of the same year. These letters can be taken as attempts to establish the superiority of the Christian people and the importance of Christian education in Assam which the missionaries did with the help of their Assamese counterparts.

The Missionary literature in a way was an endeavor to legitimize the activities of the Mission. Since the writing was meant for the European readers the issues dealt with in those accounts were also to draw the attention of the Europeans to those subject matters. Although the Mission was initially a colonial policy, in the course of time the Colonial Government lost hope in it. Later on, they were given financial support by the Government but the bonding was no longer as strong as it used to be in the beginning. Lieutenant Phillips, the Officiating Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong wrote on the Government allowance to Nowgong Mission School for the academic year 1867-68: 'I have little doubt that this institution will prove useful in time as a means of diffusing a leaven of civilization among these barbarous people, and thus at the same time cementing a kind of bond between them and the British Government.' (as cited in Meena Sharma Barkataki, 122) However, the Mission was not altogether separate from the administration or it did not consider itself to be a separate body independent of the colonial government. The papers presented and discussions that took place in the Jubilee Conference of Assam Mission held in Nowgong clearly show that the Missionaries and their conducts were further than religious. They seemed to be more concerned and interested in the business field, the benefits that could be gained from the region, both political and commercial. That they were mostly colonialists at their hearts is evident in their describing the land and the people. Reverend E. G. Phillips' comment on the Garo is pertinent to note in this context: 'They are virgin soil, not waste land, full of the roots and seeds of Hinduism, or Buddhism, or Mohammedanism, land which must be first cleared, and in which you will expect to see the evil plants constantly reappearing.' (The Assam Mission, 78) The Colonialist voice is so apparent in these lines that one can hardly find any difference between the language of a missionary and a colonialist administrator. However, in order to achieve their goal they applied different methods as preaching, persuasion and charity. Again, Reverend P. H. Moore bluntly expresses that it was their aim to enter China and that Assam was only en route that they had met.

Thus the Missionary travel literature served as an apparatus used by the Assam Mission to emphasize their relevance and to legitimize their activities. Adopting the method of compare and contrast it endeavored to establish the superiority of Christianity by highlighting what is worst in other religions, particularly Hinduism as that was the dominant religion in contemporary Assam and India, and the best in Christianity. By putting emphasis on the importance of the Mission and its stand on different political issues of that time it intended to bring back the lost hope of the British government in the Mission, and in a way, to get through with the conflicts between the two. The Missionary travel literature aimed at focusing on the contributions of the Mission to the native society and to justify the Mission's conduct before the Colonial government, not as an independent entity but as a part of the greater colonialist project. However, difference in the authors' attitudes and in their interpretations of subject matters also depends on their subjectivity as well as social stratum. This endows the narratives with different facets and layers which invariably invite critical observations.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> In 1858, Queen Victoria issued a Proclamation on the neutrality in religious matters.

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