

## In Pursuit of History: Discussion on the Collection and Interpretation of Data

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### Introduction

Over the past thirty five years and more I have taught, which I enjoyed, researched and wrote out research in the form of articles and books. Historians draw their sources from a variety of material both published and unpublished, including documents of reports both official and private, surveys and reports, again both official and private, chronicles and histories, family and personal sources, polemical documents and media communication, archaeological sources, literary and artistic sources as also oral sources, particularly useful to reconstruct the histories of pre-literate societies. For the historian to use such material they should be made available in libraries and archives both public and private. The historian should search for material from which he intends to reconstruct the past where he finds material not easily available in repositories. Often the researcher will have to depend on unconventional sources such as interviews and field work - these will substantially add to the scope of the material to be used but would require being cross-checked with other sources. In this sense therefore, historians also have an added task of playing a role in the preservation of manuscripts and other forms of recording the past.

Among the sources historians of North East India use for reconstructing our understanding of the past are archival records. The British colonial rulers had a sense of history and its uses; as biased as it was, and for this they maintained their official records in archives. The official records and papers first in handwritten form and then in print, were periodically deposited in archives attached to the offices of Collectors/Deputy Commissioners of the districts, the province levels and decisions of a higher level at the National Archives of India and the India Office Library and Records London. The

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same records offices and archives and other specialized repositories today continue to house official papers under the Indian administration. The collections were generally arranged in three categories, A, B and C. 'A' category was maintained in full form; 'B' files were retained with links to 'A' while the 'C' category were noted but not maintained.

Three generations of researchers in the region have utilized and benefited from study in official archives for their research. Several have used only the records in the region such as are available in the State Archives and record offices of the Deputy Commissioners. It was necessary for several scholars to then follow up the records and official decisions taken from this to the next level. The National Archives of India and the Jawaharlal Nehru Museum and Library, Delhi have provided historical material to countless scholars of the region. Some then have been able to go one step further to investigate and collect material at the India Office Library and Records, now the India and Oriental Collection at the British Library; manuscripts at the British Museum, both at London, and the Public Records Office at Kew, Richmond in the UK. Scholars have also accessed many other repositories abroad. The more extensive the material collection and carefully used, the more useful and significant have been this genre of research. I will later in this presentation relate my experiences of researching in these archives.

These archives were intended to be official and public repositories for official purposes and research. Today historians and social scientists are making use of the archives for generating material over a wide range of interests relevant to their research. It has not only been histories which enquire the colonial connection and have had use of archives. Registers, for instance of births and marriages and deaths in British India have cleared up many a concern for search through genealogies and the like. The Imperial War Museum also at London has a large collection of material relating to the Second World War with record, photographs, memoirs on the British, American and Commonwealth soldiers who were for periods of time in the Naga Hills and Manipur theatres of war and idea and setting up of the Lushai Scouts. The Cambridge South Asia Archives in Cambridge University has a very specialized collection of records and memorabilia on India. Researchers working on themes of the last years of British rule in India will find this collection of immense use as I did when my research scholar Wati Imchen and I researched in this Archive in the winter of 2007. Much of the material collected has been used in the publication of *On the Edge of Empire*. Imdad Hussain was able to retrieve material for the

account, photographs and sketches from these repositories for Residency to Raj Bhavan . Researching in Nottingham University Library, Department of Manuscripts and Special Collections many years earlier and shifting through the Portland Collection of Lord William Bentinck's collection was particularly rewarding for me in the reconstruction of the early phase of British rule over the Khasi-Jaintia and their interest in Sohra-Cherrapunji. I followed the lead from N. K. Baruah's biography of David Scott.

Such archives can hold both published and unpublished materials. The materials can be in any format. Some examples are manuscripts, letters, photographs, moving image and sound materials, I recently listened to very rare recordings of memoirs of tea planters of Assam on 'Koi Hai' , a portal supported by former Assam tea planters and was able to get a rare and unused photograph of Sir Robert N. Reid, Governor of Assam at Haflong, 1942. Materials in archives are often unique, specialized, or rare objects, meaning very few of them exist in the world, or they are the only ones of their kind. Some other examples of archival materials include letters written by Rabindranath Tagore with Visva Bharati University; Gopinath Bordoloi papers at the Nehru Memorial Library and Museum; East India Company records at numerous archives and principally at the West Bengal Archives; the National Archives of India and the British Library.

### **Significance of History**

Through sources such as those mentioned, historians construct and reconstruct histories and often ponder over the presentation. It is not often realized that the thought process which eventually becomes history is first organized and enacted in the historian's mind before it is placed in words. Significant threads from the past are taken by historians and woven into a work of history. This needs some explanation-much has occurred in the past but to write it all down would be impossible because no historian can cover and thus re-cover the totality of past events because their content is virtually limitless. Historians cannot recount more than a fraction of what has occurred and no historian's account ever corresponds precisely with the past- the sheer bulk of the past precludes total history. It is only the significant that the historian uses- which means that where two or more historians write about the same past there will be two or more histories. It is this use of and what constitutes the significant to a historian that gives the subject its variety and abuse.

At the core of the historian's activities is not only to establish what happened in the past, but to communicate his research. Historians are expected not to have any bias in their intent and presentation. This is more easily said than done. The historian is required to be both objective in the use and interpretation of his sources so that he does not get drawn into a subjective involvement with his material and interpretation.

### **Discovering Tirot Sing's date of death**

I will relate some of my personal experience. I was fortunate to have located the date of death of Tirot Sing, the Syiem of Nongkhlaw in the then India Office Library and Records, London. Early in 1988 while researching in the IOLR and while waiting for some material that was taking longer than usual to reach my table, I checked a catalogue on Bengal, used my common sense to check it, found an entry on Tirot Sing, requisitioned the bound volume of the Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 1835 which largely comprised of letters and had before me that all important letter which recorded the date and time of the death of the Khasi Syiem of Nongkhlaw. Returning home, I jotted down a short note on the discovery wherein I also showed that the British treated the Syiem as a ruler of a native Indian state under house arrest. He had servants, moved around Dacca in a palanquin, and was provided a fine house and a comfortable allowance to live on. After the euphoria of the find, which the Government of Meghalaya till date has not formally acknowledged, 17 July every year is commemorated as Tirot Sing day.

Politicians, traditional leaders and others called upon to make speeches on this holiday, however have not accepted the more recent findings on the last day of the Syiem. Speeches on this one day continue to tell of the "freedom fighter's" hardship in prison, which has no historical base, and refer to his last words, which come from a drama on the man and his times and therefore not real words, though they may have represented the feeling of the man. Khasis continue to want to believe in the wretched treatment of Syiem Tirot Sing. They refuse to believe the research which has been published and for which there is documentary proof. A more recent publication has an update on the last days of the Syiem.

College and university archives are repositories that preserve materials relating to a specific academic institution. Such archives may also contain a "special collections" division. The School of Oriental and African

Studies has the papers of Christopher von Haimendorf, the anthropologist who studied the Naga and Arunachal tribes, and J. P Mills I.C.S., who served for many years in the Naga Hills and later was Secretary to the Governor of Assam. S.O.A.S. holds the largest collection of Christian missionary archives in the UK; as well as personal papers of many individual missionaries. These collections span the 18th to 20th centuries and include a wealth of primary source material, such as correspondence, reports, minutes, journals, photographs and films. At SOAS I have read the papers of Thomas Jones' application to become a London Missionary Society missionary and some details of Alexander Lish, Thomas Jones' precursor in the Khasi Hills. College and university archives exist first to serve their parent institutions and alumni, and then to serve the public. The Notre Dame University, Indiana, USA, has a special collection on the Bengal Mission in East Bengal including archival material on Mizoram and Tripura missions.

### **Digital Collections**

Many archives digitize materials (photographs, meeting minutes, reports, letters, audiovisual recordings, etc.) from their collections and make them available on their websites. The NEHU Library has digitised the NEHU Academic Council and Executive Council Minutes and has uploaded a sizeable list of publications of its faculty in its digital repository DSpace@NEHU:Home. Digitization enables the researcher to view materials without visiting the archives in person. Some digital content is full-text searchable, allowing you to enter words pertinent to your research (such as names or terms) into a search box and then search the document to see whether instances of those words appear. Very interesting research material is placed on the portal 'Brahmaputra Studies Database', for example Alexander Lish's 'A Brief Account of the Khasees', Calcutta Christian Observer, 1838; and the multi-volume Assam District Gazeteers, and much more. Scholars in pursuit of history should check repository websites, catalogues, databases, and aids to see whether links to digital collections exist. However, be aware that digital collections often reflect just a fraction of the total holdings of a repository. There may be non-digitized materials at the same institution that are also pertinent to research. Researchers are advised to go through holdings listings carefully and ask the archival staff for assistance in accessing non-digitized content.

Archives set restrictions for use of their collections. While it is in order to put restrictions to the use of some collections as does SOAS and CSAA, for reasons that the donors apply, the National Archives of India restriction for use of official material on the North East after 1913 had me worried. The recourse then was to use the material in the India Office and Library Records, London which most graciously provided the required sources without any fuss. Restrictions remain on the use of maps in archives and libraries maintained by the Government of India. This is a serious problem scholar's face when there are no other options for the use of cartographic material. Another problem faced by scholars researching in archives such of the National Archives of India, the West Bengal Archives, and the Assam State Archives is that files listed in the catalogues are not made available for study as these are often not available or located. The Government of Meghalaya Records has a small collection and yet has made little effort to catalogue the records of the Deputy Commissioner, East Khasi Hills or the Deputy Commissioner, East Garo Hills, though the latter has made an attempt to preserve the diaries of the first Deputy Commissioner. It is a matter of concern that little is being done to catalogue, preserve and provide archival data. A seminar should be organized to sensitize Government and other organizations to maintain repositories and provide facilities for study and research.

### **Church History**

My research interest later shifted over the years to church history and Christianity in North East India. This was first encouraged by my colleague Prof. Milton S Sangma who did seminal work on the Baptist missions in the region. He taught a course Christianity in North East India and when he shifted to Tura as PVC, the course would have been without a teacher. I then moved into this area study first by reading the extant literature on the subject to service the course and then moved into research on the subject.

Another of my findings relates to locating archival material and the grave of Thomas Jones, the first Welsh Presbyterian missionary to the Khasis. Thomas Jones died in Calcutta on 16 September 1849. He was buried in the Scottish Cemetery, Karaya Road. This find then directed me on other interesting facets of the man including name and date of his second marriage, and the education of his grandchildren at Dr. Graham's Homes, which for me was interesting as the Homes is my alma mater. This genealogical note has been used in a number of publications the latest being

the biography on Thomas Jones, which was released on 16 February 2013.

As communication improved and imperialism gave the call to venture into new lands, a tremendous missionary spirit pervaded over much of Europe and the North American continent. Numerous missionary societies and organizations were started to take the challenge of spreading the Gospel to peoples hitherto unaffected by the Christian faith. Much of the material which may be used to construct the history of the Missions in India and North East India in particular are available in libraries and archives in India. Records of the American Baptist mission may be read at the United Theological College, Bangalore; the Eastern Theological College, Jorhat and the Council for Baptist Churches, Guwahati. Materials on the Catholic missions are available at the Archbishop's House in Shillong, and in smaller collection in the different dioceses and parishes. The Welsh Presbyterian mission records are to be found in the Synod offices at Shillong, Aizawl and in collections at the John Roberts Theological College, Mawklot and the Aizawl Theological College, Durtlang. Depending on the research to be undertaken, scholars will find ample collections within the region to research on the missions. Large holdings are in archives and universities abroad, in England, USA, France, Germany, Australia and New Zealand from where missionaries served the missions in the North East, in libraries. I have benefited reading the material in Le Mans and Paris in France on the early history of the Holy Cross Congregation in Bengal. Much more historical data is in the archives of the American and French Canadian provinces of the Congregation. These are located in the Provincial Archives Center and the Library at Notre Dame University, USA and the Provincial Archives at Montreal. The Congregation's Generalate Administration Records at Rome and the records of the present Vice Province at Dhaka also have much material on the Indian mission. Very useful for researchers has been the records at the Provincial House at Bangalore; parish records, particularly at Haflong, Badarpur, the Bishop's House Records at Silchar; the records at Agartala and files and notes from the many parishes and schools run by the Congregation.

As the missionaries came from many nationalities their records are in several languages. Language skills are required to read through records in Welsh, French, German and Italian as the case may be. The faculty of Sacred Heart and Theological College in Shillong, as have others, have skillfully used material in foreign languages when writing their dissertations.

Mission records may not relate only to the missions. For instance the language and script controversy between the colonial administration in Bengal and Assam and the American Baptist missionaries was a long drawn affair covering many years of concern for the missionaries who advocated the use of Assamese as the official language. The journal of the ABM, the Orunodoi apart from the encyclopedic information it provided the first readers of printed Assamese literature, has a wealth of information on the issue of script and language.

### **Back to the Holy Cross**

After its foundation in Le Mans, France the Holy Cross Congregation ventured into Canada and the United States of America where the base was laid for what would become the largest activity of the Congregation. The same driving spirit that went to America drew the attention of the founder, Fr Moreau and his successors to send missionaries to Bengal in 1853. In time that Bengal mission was to grow into two Holy Cross missions in erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh and India. The Bangladesh church has much to be grateful to the sacrifice and dedication of Holy Cross religious in the continued growth of the Church under somewhat trying circumstances. In like manner the Congregation has contributed to the growth of the Church in some states of North East India and in the South where formation of priests has been the attention of the Congregation for many years and a more socially oriented mission in recent times. This somewhat brief review of the heritage of the Holy Cross Congregation enables us to appreciate that its concerns are at the same time global, national, regional and local.

I will now review the nature and extent of information relating to the Holy Cross missions in India read by me in connection with my research on *They Dared to Hope*. The research covered a number of winter months. The first round of research took me to Dacca and Chittagong, Bangladesh. The Provincial House, Dhaka has a reasonable well arranged and catalogued records office from where I was able to collect some material in connection with the American Holy Cross work in Tripura. It would interest some that this records room has a whole file on Brookdene, Shillong. I regret not having gone through the record of the Diocese of Dacca as there is certain to be material therein on the Holy Cross work in Tripura. Chittagong did not have much archival material but what got me started into the history was the information I first read there from the pages of *The Bengalese*



and the Orient, the journals of the American and Canadian Holy Cross provinces respectively. I would two years later browse through the copies of the journals in the Holy Cross Mission Office at Notre Dame.

The next winter saw me travelling through Tripura and South Assam, visiting Holy Cross missions. I had not expected that there would be much in the nature of historical material to be found in these missions. To my surprise the chronicles each mission have maintained were to be of invaluable significance and the letters, reports and correspondence read during the study enabled me to have a picture of the very trying yet fulfilling experience many of the expatriate missionaries experienced in the beginnings and growth of the Tripura mission, which at a point of time the Congregation was thinking of giving up! Badarpur was sheer delight. In the priest's residence is to be read the register of baptisms and marriages going back to 1860, with records of the visits made by early French and Canadian missionaries and the Bishops of Dacca to Badarpur, a Firingi village as its inhabitants were of Portuguese descent and Cherrapunji, Shillong and Gauhati. I was then Bishop Denzil's guest for a week. The records now housed in the Bishop's House, Silchar is a treasure trove of information on the Haflong Prefecture, which was a Holy Cross mandate working in Tripura, the then Lushai Hills, Cachar and the North Cachar Hills. Here the material has not been properly catalogued other than placed in files, which have no sequence and little connection with other files. I was fortunate then to have researched in the Haflong Parish records. Though there is not much in the nature of an archive at this beautiful hill station, the chronicle of the mission, "Prefecture of Haflong" in the neat pen of Monsignor George Breen, I believe is among the most valuable material one can find on the early work of the Congregation in the region.

The third winter of research was spent abroad, first in Montreal where I spent three weeks after which I made my connection with Notre Dame University. I had decided to first research in the archives of the Canadian Brothers and the Priests Provincial Administration as by then I had learned that there would be more material in Montreal than at Notre Dame. The reason was historical. In 1927 the Holy Cross mission in Bengal was divided between the Canadians who took charge of Chittagong and the Americans with whom the charge of Dacca remained. It was the Canadian presence in the missions which were to become part of independent India that later encouraged the Canadian province to sponsor the erection of the Indian Province of Priests and the continued connection between the Brothers

Province in Canada and their Indian confreres. The Brothers archives was well organised and in the care of an enthusiastic archivist who provided whatever I believed could be useful in the book. The priests' archive is professionally managed. It is located in the basement of the old-age home of the Canadian priests. The problem of language in reading the records was overcome with the selection of records for photocopy by the archivist Fr. Maurice Dube. Among the many useful material located in this repository were the memoirs of Canadian missionaries who first visited the Lushai Hills in 1925 and 1935. The material collected from Montreal was gladly translated for me by expatriate priests and brothers.

The Provincial Archives Center, Notre Dame, is another professionally managed archive. It was able to retrieve minutes of General and Provincial Chapter, Circular Letters, letters on the Tripura connection and a complete set of The Bengalese. A longer stay in Notre Dame University as a Fulbright Scholar in 1999-2000, enabled me to make a more detailed study of records on deposit in this archive. The results of this research have been published.

The Provincial House of the Priests at Bangalore has a small collection of historical material, neatly arranged and easily located. Very interesting and useful for writing the history of the foundation of the Holy Cross in the South are the first four references mentioned in the bibliography of *They Dared to Hope*. Typed in the meticulous hand of Fr. Alfred McClure these again should be preserved for their significance in summarising the early endeavours in Yercaud and Salem in South India. If the Holy Cross is to seriously think about its history the records of the Provincial House will have to be updated and expanded. It will require expertise, funds and space. The full utility of such an archive will be appreciated when records are asked for and when other studies of the Congregation will be attempted in course of time.

Finally, reference need be made of the Generalate Administration Records at Rome. Between visits to historical sites, museums and the Vatican I read the material on deposit in this archive. As this is the Generalate Records for the entire Holy Cross Congregation the material on deposit here cover a long span in time and are in many languages. The archive has an impressive collection on India, including the North East.

## Copyright

At every stage of research and data collection I was aware of copyright guidelines. Copyright generally protects authors of original works in any form, including literary, dramatic, pictorial, musical, etc. The copyright holder has the right to control the use, reproduction, and distribution of those works, as well as the ability to benefit from works monetarily and otherwise. Archives must abide by these laws, which can be complex. In other words even if the archives physically owns a particular document, the copyright of the document and stipulations on how it can be used may be managed by another individual or institution. For example I had read the papers of Robert Lindsay, Superintendent of Sylhet in the 1780s when on one of my winter visits to Edinburgh. I had to take permission from the Earl of Balcarres, Scotland to reprint a section of Lives of the Lindsays, Anecdotes of an Indian Life (NEHU Publications, 1997), as his family continues to hold the copyright of the material on deposit in the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. While amendments to copyright law have been made to help archives and libraries better serve researchers, limitations still exist on what materials repositories can provide. Archives may require donors to give both property and copyright to the archives upon donation. However, donors can only give an archives copyright to materials that they created; so many documents in collections remain under original copyright. It is the responsibility of researchers to find the copyright holder in order to publish or cite from the materials they research.

## Some comments in conclusion

I have rambled in this essay to say something of how I started out in research, the areas of study that drew me to research, the use of archives and their collection for scholars working on modern India and Christianity with some personal anecdotes. I regret not taking notes from an article of Ma Token Rymbai. Somewhere he had mentioned of a 'Kong Kuttel', the wife of Thomas Jones. He had no records to show, no book to go by. He must have heard the story of the Welsh missionary and mentally noted the name of the missionary's second wife. How close this name that came down through two to three generations was to the name of Emma Cattell.

Much of the material used for writing the history/biography of Tirot Sing are records available in archives located in Shillong, Guwahati,

Calcutta, Delhi and London. The several biographies on the man have also brought up oral tradition from which writers have drawn interesting anecdotes. It has been established that Tirof Sing died in Dacca in 17 July 1835 of unknown circumstances. There is a tradition that he passed away after a stomach ailment. That such a young man should have died so early in life is something to ponder about and for which no answers appear to be forthcoming. There is a tradition that the Syiem was visited by his clansmen and his son. Was this son from a Khasi women of the daughter of the Nawab of Dacca another tradition makes mention? These are questions that will require study before tradition becomes historical. One other 'source' should be taken up for study. There is a belief that the last words of the Khasi Syiem was "It is better to die in prison than live as a vassal". The line referred to comes from U Tirof Singh, the Khasi drama in English of Victor Bareh. Published in 1963, the line in the drama has been quoted in other genre including, movies, dramas, biographies and other literature on the man. The words are etched in stone and in the thought processes of Khasis. Victor Bareh could have taken the lines from ancient Indian history and placed them in the context of Tirof Sing's last days. The concern of some historians is that this line from a dramatist's imagination has become 'the' last lines. Tirof Sing surely would have wanted to return to his hills, but knowing full well the nature of his house imprisonment, he was not in a position to return home. Did he have servants or any other Khasi to have heard these words? There are references that he had two servants. Could these have passed down these words? Most unlikely! I am convinced these are the words of Victor Bareh. The importance given to the last words is the interest generated by the Khasis on the man and all the reverence given to him. As a historian I am concerned that the line has become part of history. It features in history texts and historical literature. However there has been no critical thinking on the processes by which the line was first used and now become part of history texts.

I find another oral tradition requires to be critiqued. There is a tradition that David Scott, Agent to the Governor-General and resident at Nongkhlaw was informed by the mother of Tirof Sing of the impending danger to his life. It does not go well for the community to believe that the Syiem's mother should have given this information and thus Scott was saved, not so three other British officers who were killed in Nongkhlaw in early April 1829. Perhaps some thought could be applied here to see the implications this tradition has on the Khasis. The tradition goes on to say that while on

the road from Nongkhlaw to Sohra Scott threw coins to slow the persuaders if any. Scott could have been on the road some days before the Nongkhlaw massacre. He has traversed this road often and there just could have been no indication to him of the impending danger. Yet stories are made of the coins and that the Khasis while picking up the coins failed to apprehend Scott. This tradition too requires to be critiqued.

There appears to be some contradiction between what we know of the past and what is being brought out today. Good history should have a judicious use of archival records and oral tradition. While archival records can easily be interpreted and generally are reliable, the over-dependence on oral traditions in writing the past could be misused by those who have too close a relationship between the actors of the past and their own lives.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Read Sharma's critique, 1998, pp. 22-44.

<sup>2</sup> Syiemlieh, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Hussain, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Barooah, 1970.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.koi-hai.com/Default.aspx?site=Koi+Hai>

<sup>6</sup> Syiemlieh, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Syiemlieh, 2014, pp. 31-42.

<sup>8</sup> Fürer-Haimendorf Archive Digitisation Project, SOAS, University of London.

<sup>9</sup> J. P. Mills Photograph Collection, SOAS Digital Library, University of London.

<sup>10</sup> Syiemlieh, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> <http://brahmaputra.vjf.cnrs.fr/bdd/>

<sup>12</sup> Four of Thomas Jones' grandchildren were admitted into Dr Graham's Homes, Kalimpong in 1900.

<sup>13</sup> May, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew J. May, has used Welsh records extensively for *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism: The Empire of Clouds in Northeast India*. I have used material in French for writing *They Dared to Hope: The Congregation of Holy Cross in India, Fathers of the Holy Cross, Bangalore, 1998*. Mathew Muttumana has drawn from German, Italian and English sources for *Christianity in Assam and Interfaith Dialogue*.

<sup>15</sup> Kottuppallil, 1988.

<sup>16</sup> Downs, 1992.

<sup>17</sup> Syiemlieh, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> My other writings on the theme are given in References.

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