

Christian Missionaries Contribution To Kau Bru Literature

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Abstract:

The Bru people, also known as the Reang community, are one of the tribes that inhabit the Northeast Indian states of Tripura, Mizoram, and Assam. They belong to Indo- Mongoloid racial stock and speaks Kau Bru belonging to the Tibeto Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan language family (Grierson 1967). The term Bru is used to refer to the community and Kau to the language. Thus, Kau Bru means the language of the community.¹The Reang (Bru) people have a rich oral tradition that has been passed down through generations. Their literature consists of folktales, myths, legends and songs that reflect their cultural beliefs, history, and values. These oral traditions are an integral part of their identity and have played a significant role in preserving their heritage. However, with the coming of Christianity and the efforts of the Christian missionaries to Kau Bru literature has been significant, as they introduced the written word and helped develop a written language for the tribe. Furthermore, the missionaries also played a crucial role in promoting literacy among the Reang (Bru) people, enabling them to access educational opportunities and expand their knowledge beyond oral traditions. This paper is based on both primary and secondary sources. It deals with the diverse aspects of Christian missionaries' influence on the Reang (Bru) people and their activities and contribution to the growth of the Reang (Bru) literature.

Keywords: *The Bru, Christianity, Missionaries, Kau Bru*

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I. Introduction:

The Reang (Bru) are one of the tribes that live in the Northeast Indian states of Tripura, Mizoram, and Assam. According to the 2011 census, Reang (Bru) made up 188,220 of the total population of 11,66,813 scheduled tribes of Tripura, making them the second biggest after Tripuri. In Mizoram, the Reang (Bru) comprised 32,364 out of 1,091,014 people according to the 2011 census. They belong to Indo- Mongoloid racial stock. They speak *Kau Bru* belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan language family. The Reang (Bru) call themselves *Bru*.²Traditionally, they practised shifting cultivation or *huh* cultivation as the main traditional source of economy and means of their livelihood. In the past, it can be safely said that *huh* cultivation sustained the indigenous tribal population of Tripura. Even today this form of shifting cultivation is practiced throughout the state. Despite the taking up of wetland cultivation on the plain land preferences for the *huh* cultivation continues. The majority does cultivation both on *huh* and on plain land. However, many households now own rubber plantations in Tripura, and areca nut plantations which have shifted their economic activity. The traditional dress of the Reang (Bru) is very simple. The men wear a loin cloth and a piece of cloth as a wrapper for the upper portion of the body. The women wear a long piece of cloth called *Rinai* which is wrapped around the waist and hangs down to the knees. The upper body is covered with *Risa*, and the pattern weaved by them appeared to be more artistic. Owing to the spread of education among this tribe choice of dressing is gradually changing.³The Reang (Bru) have a longstanding traditional history and a rich social and cultural heritage. Their distinct way of life is represented in their festivities, clothing, music and dance performances, and even the food they eat. They have a peculiar dance known as the "Hodaigri Dance," which has achieved national and international recognition. The Reang (Bru) people are generally very religious and were associated with traditional religion. The traditional religion of the Reang (Bru) contains elements of animism (belief in natural objects), animatism (attribution of life to physical objects), dream, divination, fertility cult, magic, polytheism, taboo, totemism (transmigration of the soul) and witchcraft.⁴

II. Advent of Christianity among the Reang (Bru)

Christianity was introduced to the Reang (Bru) people of Tripura in the first half of the twentieth century by the Jampui Presbytery of Thadou-Kuki Pioneer Mission also known as the North East India General Mission. The Jampui Presbytery (later became Jampui Sakhon Baptist Association under Tripura Baptist Christian Union) played a crucial role in establishing Christianity among the Reang (Bru) people, they sent evangelist teachers to the remote areas where the Reang (Bru) people reside in North Tripura. Mentioned could be made of Lallianchunga and Chawngsela who were appointed to work with the Reang (Bru) in 1918.⁵ Through the efforts of the workers, Khuarai Meska from Longdaipacca became Christian in 1922 and was the first known Christian among the Reang (Bru).⁶ However, the real growth of Christianity among the Reang (Bru) takes place when many Reang (Bru) from South Tripura migrated to North Tripura due to the impact of the 1942-43 Reang Uprising. These concerned Reang (Bru) approached Khawtinchawma, the Christian Lushai village chief of Sabual, Jampui Hill in 1942 for shelter. The chief sympathised with them and gave them shelter and protection. Approximately 342 families were therefore relocated to the north in various groups throughout 1944-45.⁷ Some of them stayed in Sabual and Phuldungsei in Jampui Hill. The other took their settlement at Hachuh Para which was at the western foot of Jampui Hill below Sabual, Bandarima which was near the source of the river Deo or Dergang River, Ananda Bazar same place as today and later at Uttomjoy para in Longkai river valley⁸ adjacent to the present day Kheda Cherra Bazaar in Tripura. These distressed Reang (Bru) began to embrace Christianity. On 17th June 1945, around 300⁹ of them who settled nearby Jampui Hill were given baptism by three pastors, pastor Zabiaka, Pastor Lianhawla and Pastor Luaia. Which resulted in the establishment of the first Reang (Bru) Church in Hachupara, Bandarima, Dugain Mondoli (Ananda Bazar), Longai Mondoli (Uttomjoy Para) in the Longkai River valley, Santi Nagar (Santipur) and Tuichondro (Dhalai).¹⁰ Finding the Reang (Bru) responsive towards the Gospel, the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society (NZBMS) sent Garos and Lushai missionaries and evangelist teachers to work among the Reang (Bru).

III. Contribution of Missionaries to Reang (Bru) Literature

Rev. Harry Jones and Mrs Helen Jones, a missionary couple from the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society (NZBMS), moved to Reang (Bru) village at Dasda from Agartala in 1948.¹¹ Initially, they utilised Bengali for their teaching and proselytising. However, they subsequently discovered that the common people in the remote villages did not understand Bengali. Consequently, they decided to learn the Reang (Bru) language. After learning the language within a short period, they initiated Reang (Bru) literature. According to the Reang (Bru) elders Surja Kumar Toimui, Drao Kumar Toimui and Kripa Mohon Reang¹² in the 1950s a missionary couple began writing Reang (Bru) literature in Bengali script. They had written some doctrinal treatises about the Christian faith and translated hymns. Which was published in the form of a booklet called '*Rangma ni Kau Rao*' in 1951-1952 by the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society and then revised in 1957.¹³ Simultaneously, together with Reang (Bru) students, Surja Kumar Toimui, Uday Kumar Molsoi, Nojor Kumar Reang, Kripa Mohan Reang and Drao Kumar Toimui, a missionary couple translated the New Testament books of the Gospel of Mark and the First Letter of John, which were later published in 1958 by the Bible Society of India & Ceylon. Both books were published in Bengali script.¹⁴ Initially, the Bengali script used for the work appeared suitable. However, it was determined that certain sounds could not be represented in the Bengali script.

Meanwhile, Jampui Sakhon Baptist Association had been working constantly among the Reang (Bru). With the initiation of Rev. Liantawna, they translated 80 hymns from the Mizo Hymn book into Roman script and published them in 1958. Later, the hymnal was revised and expanded from 80 hymns to 150 hymns and then to 300 hymns, with 1968 and 1975 editions, respectively.¹⁵

In the mid-20th century, Christian literature saw increased demand as the church grew over the years. The Tripura Baptist Christian Union established the Tripura Christian Literature Committee in 1960 to coordinate and promote Christian literature in Tripura under the affiliation of the North East India Christian Council. The primary responsibility of the Tripura Christian Literature Committee was to coordinate the translation and publication of Christian literature in different languages to meet the increasing demand for religious texts in Tripura.¹⁶

The Reang (Bru) Christians of Deo Valley, Longai Valley and Jampui Hills of North Tripura were taken care of by the Jampui Sakhan Baptist Association under Tripura Baptist Christian Union. Many mission Schools were established in the Christian villages, one of them was at Lakhipur, Dasda subdivision. The primer for Reang (Bru) literature called '*Snungcheingmo Boi*' was prepared by Rev. Malsawma¹⁷, and published in 1969. It aimed to provide a basic foundation for reading and writing in the Reang (Bru) language. The New Testament Bible translation project was another crucial undertaking, as it would have allowed the Reang (Bru) community to access religious texts in their language. The Association under the Tripura Christian Literature Committee had deputed a senior pastor late Rev. Chawna of Jampui Hill, North Tripura to translate the New Testament in *Kau Bru*. But the sudden demise of Rev. Chawna's wife and the declining health of the translator were unfortunate events that disrupted the Bible translation project. However, in 1973 Bible Society of India (BSI) published the finished portion of his work on the gospel of St. John in Roman script.¹⁸ These unforeseen circumstances caused delays and created challenges as they had to find alternative solutions to continue the project.

On August 10, 1981, the Bible Society of India (BSI) recommenced the unfinished translation of the New Testament Bible as a full-fledged project. This project was assigned to the Reverend Sharan Kumar Reang. He began his language-related research in 1973. Since 1975, he had developed a set pattern of Bru grammar, but his book, *An Introduction to KauBru Grammer*, was not published until 1996.¹⁹ Rev. Sharan Kumar Reang embarked on the translation of the New Testament Bible using a set pattern of Bru grammar that he had formulated through years of research. This involved not only studying the language itself but also understanding the nuances of Bru grammar and syntax. From 1983 to 1987, he diligently translated the New Testament Bible, aligning his translation with the formulated Bru grammar, which was published by BSI in 1988, and finally savoured it on September 11, 1990, at Sabual, Jampui Hill. Similarly, he undertook the translation of the Old Testament Bible from June 11, 1993, to August 31, 2003, using the same grammatical pattern. In 1980, the Sunday School and Youth Department of TBCU released his *Kau Reang (Bru) Primer-1*. This was reprinted and released in 1990 under the title '*Kaumung ni Kalam*' by H.D. Buanga of Jampui. Besides these, the course for *Beginner Kau Bru Sunday School Snungmo Boi* and Sunday School guidebook on *Acts of the Apostles* was prepared by Rev. Ramani Kumar Reang (Bru).²⁰

IV. Conclusion

The Christian missionaries contributed to the development of *Kau Bru* literature. The missionary couple from the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society, Rev. Harry Jones and Mrs Helen Jones deserve special recognition for their work in establishing biblical literature in *Kau Bru* and publishing the first book in Bengali script, *Rangmani kau rao* (Language of Breath).²¹ Furthermore, we cannot discount the contribution of the Jampui Presbytery workers who translated the Mizo hymnal into the *Kau Bru* hymnal in Roman script. The contribution of Reverend Sharan Kumar Reang, who developed a set pattern of Bru grammar in *An Introduction to Kau Bru Grammar* and later began the translation of the New Testament and Old Testament Bible using a set pattern of Bru grammar he had developed through years of research, has been used until this day.

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