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## Women and Western Mission: A Case Study on the Christian Khasi and Garo Tribal Women

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Theology

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## **Abstract**

Western mission justified a mission to the Global South that was ingrained with the dominance of its culture and values. Women's mission, as a tool of this mission, patronized themselves as the 'care-taker' of the 'subjugated' women of the Global South. This mission promulgated new ways of thinking and prescribed new gender roles and values to the Global South. In doing so, it framed the traditional roles and cultural values of the non-Western world as oppressive and replaceable. This research examines the impact of Western mission from the early to the late modern period among the Khasi and Garo tribal communities in Northeast India. It will examine how the Western context influenced and shaped the later women missionaries' outlook on these tribal people and analyze the impact of modern missions.

**Keywords:** Western Feminism, Feminist theology, Khasi women, Garo women, Womanhood, Racism, Anti-Semitism, Colonialism, Zenana movement, Global South, Christian mission, Gender roles, Cultural imperialism, Western mission, Individualism, Headship Complementarianism, Egalitarianism, Female missionaries, Tribal egalitarianism, Modern Colonialism

## **Lay Summary**

The eighteenth-century European and North American missions to the non-Western world were crucial to establishing Christianity in a diverse historical and geographical context. Under colonialism, the purpose of the mission served two objectives: first, to convert natives into colonial subjects and, secondly, to propagate the missionary's ideal superior culture. Women's mission from the West, as a subset tool of this mission, patronized themselves as the 'care-taker' of the 'subjugated' women of the non-Western world. It promulgated new ways of thinking and prescribed new gender roles and values to the women in non-western societies.

This thesis defines and analyzes the Western Christian mission and how Western socio-cultural, religious, and political factors shaped the female missionaries to be the ideal tool for cultural imperialism over the non-Western world. The role of women in Western missions and their ideals reflect the socio-economic struggles of women within the Western context. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, Western feminism and Feminist theology met with Women's mission as a broad idea and influenced the female missionaries with the notion of ideal universal womanhood as practical for any given society. The West's imposition of its ideal womanhood sadly fails to appreciate the complex patterns of Indigenous thoughts, values, and cultural and religious traditions followed by women in the non-Western world.

A case study on the Khasi and Garo tribal societies in Northeast India demonstrates how Western missions to the Global South have had both beneficial, at the same time, detrimental effects on these societies. The study examines how the Western mission's imposition of an ideal egalitarian society, gender roles and womanhood culturally transformed certain groups within the

tribal community, and what are the consequences. This study is crucial for two reasons: a) the overall tendency of Western feminists to universalize gender issues based on their own experience, together with their long-standing conflict with tradition and its prescriptive gender roles; b) Western feminism has created a distorted understanding of women from non-Western communities and, through this process, changed some of the traditional categories of womanhood and the values associated with them.

## Glossary

Avunculocal residence	Married men live in or around the residence of their maternal uncle
Chatchi	The Garo clan
Durbar Kur	The Khasi clan council that oversees and manages the affairs of the clan
Gender eliminativism	A gender-free society in which a person's sex should not affect the social, economic, or political opportunities available
Global 'Other'	As part of cultural imperialism, non-white and non-western women are valued, classified, and subordinated as the inferior 'other' based on the standard of Western superior civilization.
Global North / Global South	These phrases refers to global divide not limited within geographical division but based on grouping of countries based on socio-economic and political factors. Global North is often equated to developed countries situated within "the West" such as the entirety of Europe, Russia, North America, and Australia etc. The Global South consists of "Third World" developing countries such as Asia, Africa, Latin America, Caribbean, and Pacific Islands which are often marginalized on cultural, economic, and political grounds.
ling	A Khasi house or family usually made up of a grandmother, her daughters, and grandchildren. Natal family
Jait	A Khasi term for a sub-clan
Khadduh	The youngest daughter in a Khasi family
Kni Rangbah	The oldest maternal uncle in a Khasi clan
Kpoh	Khasi lineage
Kur	A Khasi clan
Machong	Sub-clan of Garo (these sub-clans share a common mother)

Matrilocal/Uxorilocal	A woman after her marriage remains in her mother's household. Her husband leaves his family house and moves into his wife's residence.
Nok	Garó house/family
Uxorilocal	A married couple living with or near the wife's family

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>Lay Summary</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Glossary</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>viii</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter I: The Paradigms of Modern and Postmodern Women’s Mission</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<i>1. The Western Mission Broadly Conceived</i> .....	8
<i>2. Spiritual Awakenings</i> .....	9
<i>3. Political Factors</i> .....	11
<i>4. Negative Views of Mission</i> .....	12
<i>5. Missions for Liberation</i> .....	14
<i>6. Women and the Professionalization of the Mission</i> .....	15
<i>7. Emergence of Feminism</i> .....	19
<i>8. Anti-Semitism in Historical Criticism &amp; Feminist Theology</i> .....	21
<i>9. Returning to the Changing Ideals of Womanhood Through the Nineteenth Century</i> .....	25
<i>10. Gender Definitions in the Twentieth Century</i> .....	27
<i>11. Misconceptions About the Non-Western World</i> .....	30
<i>12 The Schism Between the Global North and Global South</i> .....	31
<i>13 Summary</i> .....	33
<b>Chapter 2: A Case Study on the Khasi and Garo Tribal Communities</b> .....	<b>34</b>

1. <i>Early Intervention</i> .....	36
2. <i>The Christian Missions</i> .....	39
3. <i>The Impact of Christian Mission Among the Khasi and Garo</i> .....	41
4. <i>The Role of the Bible as Sola Scriptura</i> .....	43
5. <i>The Sociocultural Background of the Tribal Groups</i> .....	47
6. <i>The Khasi family structure</i> .....	48
7. <i>The Garos family structure</i> .....	49
8. <i>Traditional Gender Roles Among Khasis</i> .....	50
a) <i>The Khasi women</i> .....	50
b) <i>The Khasi men</i> .....	51
9. <i>Traditional Gender Roles Among the Garo</i> .....	52
<b>Chapter 3 Impact of Western Christian Missionary Women</b> .....	<b>54</b>
1. <i>The Social Developmental Missions</i> .....	55
2. <i>The Zenana Missions in India</i> .....	57
3. <i>Female Missionaries' Revised Values for Native Women</i> .....	59
4. <i>Similarities Between Early Missionary Women and Indian Women</i> .....	60
5. <i>The Challenge to the Traditional Woman's Role</i> .....	61
6. <i>Westernized Urbanism Vs. Rural</i> .....	64
7. <i>Tribal Christians in the Urban Regions and their Challenges</i> .....	67
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>69</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>79</b>



## List of Figures

Figure 3. 1 Map of Meghalaya.....	35
Figure 4.6 1: Scheduled Tribe Christian Population for Each Tribe in the State of Meghalaya - 2011 .....	65

## Introduction

Colonialism and mission are complementary so that early modern and modern missionary expression is inextricably linked to Western global expansion. The West's right to colonize apparently came with the duty of Christianizing. One of the detrimental effects was the colonizer's imposition of *Western civilization* on the colonized. Women's foreign mission as a subset of the broader mission movement was and is an important tool of cultural imperialism used with the intent of converting non-Western women to the ideal and often shifting womanhood of the West. While women's mission starts with the great missionary movements of modernity, it in fact adopted many ideas and structures that would be defined as proto-feminist and then were later shaped by feminist theology as it develops in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Unsurprisingly, just as feminism and feminist theology as a broad idea in the last decades has been challenged and criticized, by the Western subaltern and Global Other such as in American womanist or Latin American *mujerista* theologies, so has missionary programs reevaluated the history of women's mission and the role of Colonialism therein.<sup>1</sup> Recent scholarship on the prototypical feminist interpretations of the Bible, for example, have brought into question deeper issues long associated with racism and anti-Semitism which problematize the claim of universal sisterhood that were supposed to be emancipatory for the Global woman.<sup>2</sup> Claudia Setzer, in her study on Elizabeth Cady Stanton, although her work deals with Stanton

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1. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2004).

2. Claudia Setzer, "A Jewish Reading of the Woman's Bible," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 27, no. 2 (2011): 71–84, <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.2979/jfemistudreli.27.2.71>.

and *The Women's Bible* that was rejected by many feminist theologians and movement, is an example of this emerging area of study. In this work, Setzer reveals how one of the earliest attempts to create a feminist Bible had themes later associated with antisemitism.<sup>3</sup> This is important because of later postcolonial biblical scholarship would identify the same issues in the larger corpus of Western theology and biblical interpretation.

For Post-colonial thinkers such as Serene Khader and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Western feminism and feminist theology, along with their movements, have distorted the image of non-Western women.<sup>4</sup> Khader's recent and well-regarded criticism of Western feminism is similar to the position held by many biblical scholars from the Global South.<sup>5</sup> Her naming decision is quite shocking but reinforces the theological problem that accompany feminist theology as it came to dominate mission and church order.

According to Khader, *missionary feminism* divides the world into two types of societies. The first type, which is the modern type to which the West belongs, is more advanced than the other. This type of society is modern with adherence to moral principles, and respect to individual rights and freedom. The second type, which is the backward type of society to which all non-western societies belong, is defined by hierarchy, adherence to custom, violence, and

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3. Setzer.

4. Serene J Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women & Patriarchy* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995).

5. Sugirtharajah R.S., *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, New ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 460; Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 2001), 28.

poverty. Thus, *missionary feminism* promotes the western form of society, and life with its ideal cultural norms and practices as the ideal futuristic society for all non-western societies to embody. <sup>6</sup> For Khader, it does this by diminishing all local expressions of gender and women, cataloguing them as primitive or non-progressive. In later sections, what Khader argues manifests in the secular feminist movement will be argued also manifest in biblical and theological interpretations of women that was seeded deeply in modernity and Western's theology's interactions and carried by missionaries throughout the modern period of colonization.

One of the harmful consequences of *missionary feminism* for Khader and the ideals of universal sisterhood is that it misconstrued the traditional categories of womanhood and associated traditional values that were found in the non-western societies. In other words, what Khader (and Oduyoye) see as typical in Western feminism (and theology) as bred in the bone manifests in the flesh of global women just as other colonial ideas dutifully 'Christianized' in the name of progress. Her perspective is important here because it situates how the Western gender-based ideals and policies were propagated and imposed on the tribal societies as part of the colonial process. Given that colonialization also was in many ways Christianization, it follows that the systemic issues within Western biblical and theological interpretations will manifest in terms of gender identity and universal sisterhood values. The old adage that the second person off the colonizer's gunboat was the missionary is very appropriate. Other studies, such as the work of Susaina Arya do similar work on East Asian feminist discourse, including situating caste

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6. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism*, 5, 32.

systems, and argue against the dismissal of Asian ‘tradition’ (including family and gender structures) simply because it is a tradition that modern progress wished to dismiss. Arya reiterates Khader’s view by agreeing that missionary feminism failed because of its supremacist hegemony, and it lacked the necessary empirical tool, theory and praxis to grasp the ground reality of people in the Global South. It also failed due to the ideological superiority of the West that it possessed, a superiority that assumes a false reality of the *other* women’s lives.<sup>7</sup> This explains and correlates well with the problems associated with the policies adopted and imposed on *other* women by the missionary women of late modern period and how they failed to understand the complex social mechanisms of other societies. For Khader, Arya, postcolonial theologians and biblical scholars the goal of universal sisterhood, a norm to be applauded, was lost in the dismissal of all traditional social structures in non-Western cultures exactly because of ideas in missionary feminism that were local to the West in which there was a tacit note of superiority and even, in the biblical modes, antisemitism as Jewish persons were the first subaltern of the biblical interpreters.

This thesis, therefore, will explore the association of Western mission and the role of women within mission and how they influenced non-Western societies through cultural imperialism. A case study of the Khasi and Garo tribes and their long association with Western mission will be used to evaluate and understand the impact of missionary efforts on the culture, traditional values and role of Khasi and Garo women. The study will examine the history of

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7. Sunaina Arya, “Khader’s Feminist Ethic Against Imperialism: Proposing a Pluriversal Philosophic Resolve,” *Journal of Global Ethics*, 16, no. 3 (2021): 371–72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2021.1877786>.

Christian mission among these tribes during the colonial and early post-colonial period and evaluate its positive and negative outcomes such as how these tribes conformed to the Christian doctrines, and how they interpret the Bible as understood from the missionary history of contact. The centrality of the Bible is often overlooked but for many global women, the world of the Bible is very similar socially and experientially to their own lives and the move to a hermeneutic of patriarchal suspicion problematizes their plain reading. Also, an area that has not yet been studied by any scholarships is the challenge faced by Christian tribal women from the rural population of Meghalaya, who under modern feminist ideals and propaganda, are totalized and colonized under patriarchal narrations.

This thesis is divided into three sections. The first section defines and analyzes the Western Christian mission to the Global South and how socio-cultural, religious, and political factors shaped the women missionaries to be the ideal tool for cultural imperialism over the non-Western world. The second section is a case study based on the Khasi and Garo tribal communities. This section will discuss on their tribal history, social system, and encounters with Christianity. Following a discussion of the impact of Christianization on these communities, the last section of this study draws conclusions based on its findings.

The pandemic during 2019-22 had tremendously put on hold the initial plan for ethnographic research which is critical for this study. This has affected at the same time limited the study to a great extent. Inaccessibility to the communities to collect data, and limitation to access archival documents which is located in Meghalaya were some of the major constrains in this research. Despite these constrains, the research provides a wide range of primary sources, secondary sources, and data to root out the different historical agents involved in the ever-progressing Western mission to these non-western societies.

The potential for future study is ethnographic research on these tribal communities and it is very critical factor here. The study is crucial for the following reasons. About 70% of the land of Meghalaya is covered in forest. Nearly 80% of the population are in the rural areas and they are basically agrarians who depend on the natural resources for their livelihood. Hence, majority of the tribal population is rural in character. Experts on these tribes defines these tribes as communitarian-based society. They maintain a social network within which members are closely connected. Another unique characteristic about these tribes is that they follow gender-based division of roles and occupy distinctive spaces within the clan. Women who are the central figures occupy prominent roles in the domestic sphere, which is dedicated to household duties, assisting in farming during harvest season, and trading in the market. In essence, this is the traditional structure and functions of the Khasi and Garo tribal societies. However, as part of the modernization process through Western Christian missions, certain groups in Meghalaya are undergoing changes to their traditional roles and structures. Today, a closer look on these tribal communities, we find a clear division of the population based on geographic location, the urban and rural population. These two groups differ from each other based on traditions, values, and lifestyle.

The urban population exhibits common characteristics that is similar to the Western individualistic ideals, customs, and practices. The social network among the urban population is absent, and most of the traditional tribal aspects has been lost or replaced by modern values. These changes also came with concerns that women in the urban regions are losing their central role, and their rights within their society and homes. In addition, there exists a conflict between urban and rural populations in terms of values, ideas, and practices.

The inevitable conundrum faced by the tribal women today is the ongoing effects of misconstrued and misrepresented narrations about them under modern feminism. The wide range of scholarships available on the Khasi and Garo women assumes that these women are obsessed by modern progressive ideologies of the West. The concept of matriarchy is often a misnomer here and it can follow a gross representation of some popular feminism. It represents the mirror image of patriarchy where women rule as opposed to men. Hence, it has been misused and misrepresented as *rule by women* by various schools of thought and other political agents who are keen to promote the notion of women's empowerment.

Some studies embed the tribal women within patriarchal structures. It often describe women in the rural regions, who are strict observants of traditions, as dominated under *patriarchalism*.<sup>8</sup> These are the women from the rural population who make up the majority and juxtapose them to the urban based women. Thus, there is the danger of totalizing both the populations under modern narrations. Meghalayan women have raised their concern that most of the research and published articles are based on data drawn from and represented by a small group of educated English-speaking progressive Meghalayan women who hardly represent the realities of common women. Therefore, ethnographic research is critical factor to provide the platform for these common women who are either ignored or silenced.

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8. Sapphira Beth, "The Khasi Community Is Matrilineal, But Not Matriarchal," *Feminism in India*, March 15, 2018, <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/03/16/khasi-community-matrilineal-society/>; Patricia Mukhim, "'Matrilineal' Meghalaya Goes to Polls with Only 32 Women in Fray," *The Quint*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/opinion-meghalaya-assembly-elections-northeast-few-women-politicians-bjp-cong>; Gertrude Lamare, "Presbyterian Church Patriarchy » RAIOT," *RAIOT* (blog), September 22, 2015, <https://raiot.in/presbyterian-church-patriarchy/>.



## Chapter I: The Paradigms of Modern and Postmodern Women's Mission

### *1. The Western Mission Broadly Conceived*

The term mission, according to Bosch, entails a sender, a person or persons sent by the sender, those to whom one is sent, and an assignment. Every aspect of the term presumes that the one who sends has the authority to do so.<sup>9</sup> Presumably this is God or the Church. But the classical connotation of mission relates to the Latin meaning, which is an expression employed in the doctrine of the Trinity to denote the sending of the Son by the Father and of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son. This is broadly in Christian theology and history, the role of evangelism and the conversion of humans to the Gospel and its forms within churches. This is a remarkably fluid idea, with all manner of expressions and applications as Christianity spread beyond its first-century Jewish context.

Unlike its ecclesiastical connotation, the term mission in modern times, largely meant as post Enlightenment and European global expansion beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It is historically linked with the colonial era and thus the idea of magisterial commissioning that is more expansive than merely Christian making but culture building as a reflection of the Colonizer.<sup>10</sup> Today, the Christian mission, when interpreted, takes one of the two forms. On one side, we have the internal church accounts of selfless missionaries sent by God with a Gospel mission to spread the Good News to the ends of the world, and on the other the mission in the

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9. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Studies in Theology of Mission*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition, American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2011), 1.

10. Bosch, 232–33.

modern period that is marked by imperialism or, in other words, the quest for the political, social, and economic cause of the colonizer. This latter definition is the working definition for this thesis. The intractable reality is that the second person off the gunboat of the colonizer was the missionary. For historians and mission scholars alike, Christian mission served as an agent to Christianize and Westernize the non-Western pagan world.

The eighteenth-century European and North American missions to the Global South were crucial to establishing Christianity in a diverse historical and geographical context. Nevertheless, under colonialism, the purpose of the mission served two objectives: first, to convert natives into colonial subjects and, secondly, to propagate the missionary's ideal superior culture. Since the 1800s and particularly with the Edinburgh (1910) and Lausanne conferences (1974), the concept of Christian mission has evolved considerably. With indigenization and social aid as primary modes of activity, early missionary movements were haphazard on the success of both. The idea of mission as social reformer is linked to its colonial history, and its idea of progress and ideality of social norms via voluntary or charitable service was to mimic the Western social roles. It is, therefore, crucial to navigate through some of the key events to understand how these developments shaped and influenced the mission, particularly missionary women, considering that they comprised the majority of the mission force.

## *2. Spiritual Awakenings*

In his comprehensive analysis of Christian missions, David Bosch explicitly draws on the events that converged to affect a shift in the Western world, which has had a profound effect on missionary developments. In the eighteenth century, missions expanded significantly, far beyond the Western world. The Great Awakening in the American colonies between 1726 and 1760,

followed by the Second Great Awakening of 1787—1825, which is referred to as the Evangelical Revival in England, had a profound impact on Western missions. The First Awakening laid the foundation for many modern missionary activities, but it was during the Second Awakening that the missionary cause became the great passion of American churches.<sup>11</sup>

One of the significant features of the Second Awakening in both Britain and North America was the founding of societies specifically devoted to the missionary cause or independent or adjunct to churches. These missions were not to make churches for the colonizer, that was the role of the church itself to replicate London or Rome in the colony; but rather to make colonized churches—churches for the people who were colonized. The relationship between colonizer church and colonized church is problematic, but it is almost certain that the colonized were ‘equal’ but separate. By 1817, an explosion of missionary endeavors by the Evangelical Protestants issued several voluntary lay missionary societies. Some of these were denominational and some nondenominational, such as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810), the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (1818), and various other missions led by William Carey.<sup>12</sup> Critically, however, these missionary movements, while they were more open to indigenization and culturally sensitive, still had breed in the flesh the inherent ideas of the colonization project to bring progress to the colonized alongside the Gospel.

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11. Bosch, 285-86.

12. Bosch, 283–86.

### *3. Political Factors*

Western missions to the Global South were shaped by many political factors, regardless of whether they had American or European origins. The Enlightenment spirit in Europe, Rationalism in Germany, and many other political instabilities caused by wars, led to a schism between the official churches and non-conformists in the Western world.<sup>13</sup> The alliance between the Church and State was often under pressure, as the colonial policies either hampered missionary holistic approaches or at times, acquired religious associations.<sup>14</sup> The overseas missions were primarily the project of the mainline or State established or nearly established churches and their agencies. These developments had a significant impact on the Christian missionary enterprise – even with the creation of separate mission societies as above but they still had connections to the mainline churches. These mainline churches were indifferent, showed little interest in the predicament of the poor within their own countries and abroad, and paid little interest to colonial policies.<sup>15</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, the devastation of social and civil developments in the Western churches which include the anti-slavery, nationalism and early capitalism created economic crises, poverty, inequality, racial discrimination, and religious rationale. This ushered in a gradual transition away from the primacy of evangelism to a mission concerned with social causes and began to lay the perfect groundwork for the Social Gospel movements across the

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13. Bosch, 286–88.

14. Bosch, 281–83.

15. Bosch, 287.

Christian missions.<sup>16</sup> This is important to note. As the West's own social issues manifested and mainline churches responded in real tangible Social Gospel modes, so did the missionaries, who were sanctioned and society based, took those ideas with them to new climes in the colonies. The colonies were, again, echoes of the colonizer's own social constructs regardless of the value of education, medical treatment and so forth.

As a result, the schism between conservative missions (so called evangelicals and free churches including some of the great missionary societies) and 'liberal missions' affiliated with mainline churches widened further on the question of whether evangelism precedes civilization or if civilization is a prerequisite for evangelism. Despite this rift, the strategy for the conservatives and the liberals were still committed to the culture of the West as normative, and which they actively propagated despite the stress on being conservative or liberal.<sup>17</sup> The transition from a Christian model of missions to voluntary movements in the 1880s is an indication of how socioeconomic and political changes, as well as the Church's failure to accommodate these changes, altered the missionary enterprise. The Western world's cultural, socio-economic, and political shifts, therefore, are often reflected in its overseas missions.

#### ***4. Negative Views of Mission***

However, this was not unnoticed. Many mainline denominations during the late nineteenth century began to secularize and professionalize the missionary enterprise exclusively along social lines of education, health or medical care or moral causes. One of the factors that led

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16. Bosch, 290.

17. Bosch, 303.

to this development was the negative association of mission with the imperialistic cause. As a result, the Protestant mission's policy of the Gospel mission and the need for personal spiritual experience gave way to missions focused on social reforms and social services. Individuals with a common cause organized together to create a plethora of new societies that promoted a variety of religious and societal concerns as part of their mission, including antislavery, prison reform, temperance, abolishment of social inequalities or customs such as Sati and other charitable causes. The ideology behind these societies was the social and political egalitarianism of the emerging democracies.<sup>18</sup>

It is within this context that the gradual but significant growth of women's missionary societies and women's missions took place. Of course, it is important to note that both so called conservative or gospel missions and mainline liberal missions had much positive influence as well as less desired influence just as colonization can be said to have brought education, social reform and movements itself. The 20<sup>th</sup> century missionary movement has been very active in trying to decipher this history, address it and move to indigenization of self-sufficient expressions of Christian life and church. But it remains clear that the early history of modern mission was not always as intentional and that the drift to social modes of mission became a preferred, if not the preferred way of evangelization. Of course, the question remains, especially in regard to women, what is the ideal woman then? The answer is the colonizer's understanding of being a woman in social mores and construction.

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18. Bosch, 334–35.

## 5. Missions for Liberation

An ideal example to illustrate the growth of women missionary societies in the Western world can be taken from the American context. Women in the American missionary enterprise played a crucial role in supporting a mission undergirded with prayer, devotion, financial support, and facilitation of their experience and knowledge. But the underlying social issues related to gender roles and equality of the period questioned the role of women within mission. Despite their active involvement, they faced opposition and a lack of acknowledgment by men in the enterprise, prompting them to organize their mission boards. Various mission boards such as the Woman's Union Missionary Society of America (1860), the World's Missionary Committee of Christian Women (1888), Federation of Woman's Boards of Foreign Missions (1916), London Missionary Society (though established in 1795, the society allowed women to join the Board of Directors by 1875), and the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society are few among many societies which sprang up in different parts of the Western world. Their growth was substantial; by 1900, over 1200 single women missionaries were supported by 41 women's agencies, and by 1910, these agencies had grown to support a membership of 2,000,000.<sup>19</sup>

Despite initial opposition, American women missionaries played a prominent role in these agencies, and their participation in the missions during this period marked the beginning of the Feminist movement in North America. The opposition they faced, lack of recognition for

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19. London Missionary Society, "Encyclopedia of Western Colonialism Since 1450," London Missionary Society, 2019, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/london-missionary-society-0>; Gerald H. Anderson, "American Protestants in Pursuit of Mission: 1886-1986," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 12, no. 3 (July 1, 1988): 98-117 <https://doi.org/10.1177/239693938801200301>.

their role in the mission, and underlying social issues related to gender role, became the factors that often shaped their mission policies. Their own sense of marginalization drove, in part, their belief in improving the status of women in other societies through services and education that they themselves were denied at some level with an emphasis on the emancipation of women from societal restrictions.

### ***6. Women and the Professionalization of the Mission***

Before the 1860s, the social context of the women's foreign missionary movement was significantly influenced by Victorian norms. The Victorian womanhood in England, which is referred to as the Cult of Domesticity or Cult of True Womanhood in the U.S had a profound impact on women in this period. The Victorian norms often supplemented the evangelical duty, exemplifying the ideals of companionate marriage and an open, well-ordered Christian home. These were missionaries who were never paid, were never listed on missionary rolls and were not eligible for pensions, but whose work has largely gone unrecognized in the missionary literature.<sup>20</sup>

Pickens finds a close resemblance between the biblical ideal femininity and the mainstream Victorian womanhood of this period. The four traits of Victorian womanhood (piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity) relate closely with the biblical depiction of Mary's

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20. Indrani Sen, *Gendered Transactions: The White Woman in Colonial India, c. 1820-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 24–25.



virtues as formulated throughout Church history as recoded in Victorian church theology.<sup>21</sup> The popular magazines and books of this period such as *The Ladies' Magazine* and Godey's *Lady's Book*, which sold 150,000 copies annually, promoted ideal feminine behaviors that matched those of Victorian womanhood and influenced every facet of American culture in the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup>

With the above move to professionalization of women's foreign missions by the late 1880s and beyond, women's role in the mission field was no longer defined in terms of passivity as the Victorian ideal. Modern womanhood was oriented toward professional services that catered to so-called feminine propensities as extensions not of motherhood or Victorian values but rather as lesser professional men.<sup>23</sup> This is evident in the leaflet published by the Presbyterian Ladies' Foreign Missionary Society, which states that the criteria for the foreign mission field require three paths of service, namely: evangelistic, educational, and medical service, all of

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21. Kara Lynne Pickens, "The Reinterpretation of Biblical Symbols Through the Lives and Fictions of Victorian Women: To Come Within the Orbit of Possibility" (PhD. Thesis, Glasgow, University of Glasgow, 2012), 37–39, <https://tinyurl.com/ycy6p3uz>, <https://tinyurl.com/ycy6p3uz>.

22. Independence Hall Association Philadelphia, "Ushistory.Org: The Emergence of 'Women's Sphere,'" U.S. History Pre-Columbian to the New Millennium, 2008, <https://tinyurl.com/3dx2efta>.

23. Patricia R Hill, *The World Their Household: The American Woman's Foreign Mission Movement and Cultural Transformation 1870-1920* (Michigan: The University of Michigan, 1985), 14.

which necessitate a good education and qualified faculties.<sup>24</sup> What we see here is a gradual progression from the ideal womanhood with the qualities of maternal love and religious values, to an educated woman (motherhood is silent) competent to carry out the modern mission. Within the mission movement, efforts to train female missionaries under scientific theories were adopted, and they “entered a public female world by adopting the more radical stance of feminists.”<sup>25</sup>

One of the key features that attracted many women to the missionary societies was flexibility in the qualification for the mission field. Unlike the Catholic missions, the Protestant missions and voluntary societies were not subject to the jurisdiction of the clergy. These missionary societies were free, open, responsible, and embraced all classes, both sexes, and all ages, which made the mission field more favorable and attractive to many women, especially those from North American societies.<sup>26</sup> The necessity to secularize and professionalize modern missions, as well as to prioritize the role of women in missions, was another substantial shift that occurred in the missionary enterprise during the 1890s. The professional competence cultivated by women leaders aligned with symbols of male professionalism. Consequently, professionalized missionary women replaced the Victorian womanhood initially promulgated by the Evangelical

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24. Mary Pinneo Dennis, “Gleanings from the Portfolio of a Missionary Candidate Committee, Woman’s Work,” in *Woman’s Work for Woman*, vol. XI (New York: Woman’s Foreign Missionary Societies of the Presbyterian Church, 1896), 310, [https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=tjXsEC\\_Rf8YC&pg=GBS.PA306&hl=en](https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=tjXsEC_Rf8YC&pg=GBS.PA306&hl=en).

25. Hill, *The World*, 116–17.

26. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 335.

Protestant enterprise with a modern form of womanhood better suited for the modern mission.<sup>27</sup>

Women missionaries were more likely to be medically trained than theologically trained. More likely to be public educators than catechists. Single than married.

Even though women missionaries required specific skills based on the need for evangelization, by the 1890s the deciding criterion for missionary qualification was the willingness to fulfill the demands of modern missions, which were equivalent to male professionalism.<sup>28</sup> The transition of women and their role in the missionary enterprise was not an isolated development. We find similar intermittent outbreaks of the proto-feminist movement gaining popular support within the Western world. Parallel to these developments was the Woman's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott in 1848, which sparked the women's rights crusade, and this marked the beginning of first wave of feminism in the United States. Despite the initial criticism and opposition this protest received from Evangelical Protestantism, it attracted great publicity.<sup>29</sup> It was a protest demanding a separate sphere and equality with men in the missionary enterprise. Despite its wide publicity, the women's foreign mission movement diminished within American Protestantism due to oppositions. However, because of its strong association with early first wave Feminism, by 1900, the prospect of women working in foreign missions had revived and looked more promising.<sup>30</sup>

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27. Hill, *The World*, 93–94.

28. Hill, 93–94.

29. Hill, 34–35.

30. Hill, 34.

The progression since the nineteenth century has been rapid and significant with groups of women from various backgrounds organizing together to create the *universal sisterhood* to strengthen women's social roles. These developments demonstrate how women's foreign missions under various social and cultural progressions of Western society upheld varied forms of ideal womanhood and policies.

## 7. Emergence of Feminism

The association between Feminism and Feminist theology is a key component that must be examined here to gain a clear understanding about the transition of women's role in foreign mission. In the 1890s, Feminism (derived from the French word *Feminisme* as coined by utopian socialist Charles Fourier) first appeared in English in association with the movement for equal political and legal rights for women. But its usage became more frequent by 1913 with its expression of women's efforts towards equality.<sup>31</sup> Even though there is no specific date to point to the development of Feminist ideology with a religious cause, the Seneca Falls Convention, held in 1848 at the Wesleyan Chapel in Seneca Falls, is heralded as the first American women's rights convention. Proto-Feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott (a Quaker preacher known for her anti-slavery, women's rights, and religious stances), and others voiced their concerns with the express goal of granting women the rights and freedoms that the

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31. Nancy F. Cott, *Grounding of Modern Feminism* (London: Yale U.P., 1989), 13, <http://archive.org/details/groundingofmoder00cott>; "Feminism" - *New World Encyclopedia*, n.d., [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/feminism#History\\_of\\_Feminism](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/feminism#History_of_Feminism).

Declaration of Independence granted to men.<sup>32</sup> By the late nineteenth century, the demand for gender justice for women had become so compelling that it resonated throughout the Protestant Church with debates raging over whether the church, its doctrine, and mission should be feminized. During this period, the Protestant Church also underwent a radical shift that called into question the authority, meaning, and traditional interpretations of Scripture. As the women's liberation movement grew within the Church, it reconsidered biblical scholarship in order to read the entire Church history with its patriarchal oppressive systems and redefine women's roles within the Church.

Gerda Lerner notes that, “. . . feminist biblical criticism can be seen as an appropriate and perhaps not unexpected response to the constraints and limitations imposed upon women's intellectual development by religiously sanctioned gender definitions.”<sup>33</sup> As such, the movement is linked, in small and large ways, to biblical scholarship of the period as a mode of political discourse that is found in wider feminist thought. She defines the Western feminist consciousness in five categories: 1) women's awareness that they belong to a subordinate group, 2) their condition of subordination is socially determined, 3) the need to develop a sense of universal sisterhood, 4) goals and strategies for changing their oppressive condition, and 5) the

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32. John Muir, “Today in History - July 19: The Seneca Falls Convention,” Digital Library, 1848, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/july-19/>; Biography.com Editors, “Lucretia Mott Biography,” The Biography.com, April 2, 2014, <https://www.biography.com/activist/lucretia-mott>.

33. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 138.

development of an alternate vision of the future.<sup>34</sup> Adopting these categories, biblical feminists by the twentieth century gave new meaning to biblical figures, narrative and theologies which eschewed those ideas which inhibited that consciousness. It mostly reflected their social struggle for equality and the emancipation of women.<sup>35</sup> This theme of confusion of politics or social struggle as a kind of biblical cipher is found in the work of R.S. Sugirtharajah.

Sugirtharajah points out the western biblical interpretation of women's role place women in patriarchal culture, and especially the "double colonization" faced by women under imperial and patriarchal ideologies. Such colonizing rhetoric, according to him, has to do with denigrating and shaming the culture, history, and faith of the colonized. Thus, by 1990s, many African, Asian, and Hispanic-American interpreters resorted to an alternative reading of the Bible unlike to the western methods. It is within this background, Sugirtharajah proposed postcolonial biblical criticism as a new method to challenge such "universalist, totalizing form of European interpretation" of women in non-western world.<sup>36</sup>

### ***8. Anti-Semitism in Historical Criticism & Feminist Theology***

Now coming back to the cultural context of the western world during the late nineteenth century, another key development dominant in Europe and parts of the Western world in relation to Western theology was widespread anti-Semitism. Liberating thoughts, as well as the anti-

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34. Lerner, 274.

35. Lerner, 163.

36. Sugirtharajah R.S., *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism* (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 15, 47–6.

Semitism prevalent at this time, provided conducive ground for modern biblical critics to reexamine both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. This was heightened under the influence of the history of religion school, a group of German Protestant scholars who sought to understand the religion of the Old and New Testament within the context of their historical environment.<sup>37</sup>

Morrow situates the history of modern biblical criticism in its political context, as he describes a significant shift that took place in the German-speaking world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The traditional biblical exegesis known as historical criticism had been severed from the ecclesial or theological foundation. Biblical studies, which were traditionally focused on the Scripture, were supplanted by a new interest in Classical Greek and Roman cultural values and historical studies.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, he finds that German scholars, universities, and curriculum and its set standards became instrumental to exclude Jews, Judaism, and Catholics from their vision of secularized religious institutions that adhered to the State. This approach also created a sharp dichotomy between the Aryan or Indo-European and the Semitic.<sup>39</sup>

Religious studies, the history of religion developed in German scholarship, justified and promoted the idea of Aryan (the idea of Germans as the superior race over above all other races). They replaced a de-Judaized New Testament and early Christianity, at the same time denigrating Semitic culture, particularly the Old Testament and eventually Islam. It was within this context

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37. Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Knox Press, 1981), 167.

38. Jeffrey L Morrow, "The Politics of Biblical Interpretation: A 'Criticism of Criticism,'" *New Blackfriars* 91, no. 1035 (2010 2009): 539, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2009.01342.x>

39. Morrow, 539–41.

that prominent scholars such as Julius Wellhausen, Adolf von Harnack, Friedrich Delitzsch, Gerhard Kittel, et al. pushed their anti-Jewish biases of the historical synthesis of the Jewish Scripture.<sup>40</sup> For instance, Julius Wellhausen, a German modern biblical scholar of this period, viewed Judaism with its primitive expressions and belief systems, as a setback for human progression.<sup>41</sup>

Another example can be quoted from De Wette who stated that, “The Jews never reached a high degree of culture and always preserved a national character . . . they were in the most striking manner distinguished from the neighboring and contemporary nations . . . the shepherd only speaks in the soul of the shepherd; and the primitive Oriental only speaks in the soul of another Oriental.”<sup>42</sup> Hence, Setzer argues that such views promote the idea of Jews as a less developed group both theologically and socially.

Women’s *inferior status* within ancient and orthodox Judaism and early Christianity as not quite de-Judaized became a major theme amongst some American Protestant feminist theologians. The Bible, particularly the Old Testament, and the wide scrutiny of New Testament passages on women’s roles were found to be a significant challenge among many. For instance, Matilda Joslyn Gage, an active member of the National Woman’s Rights party, in her speech at the Free Thought convention in 1878, pointed out that the Bible was the greatest challenges in

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40. Morrow, 542.

41. Jon Douglas Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 42; Solomon Schechter, “Higher Criticism- Higher Anti-Semitism,” in *Seminary Addresses and Other Papers* (Cincinnati: Ark Publishing, 1915), 36–37.

42. Setzer, “A Jewish Reading,” 78.



the way of women's advancement.<sup>43</sup> Similar views presented at the Annual Convention of the National Woman Suffrage Association criticized the dogmas incorporated in religious creeds of Judaism, teaching that woman was an after-thought in the creation, thus subjugating them under patriarchal structures within Judaism"<sup>44</sup> It is evident that these proto-feminists saw the Bible as the greatest barrier to women's emancipation and feminist ideals.

The *inferior status* of women within Judaism was presented to denigrate Judaism as "oriental" and "primitive."<sup>45</sup> This is prescient to how other non-Western cultures would be seen in regards to gender roles. Proto-feminist theologians thus challenged the traditional definition of woman's role followed within the Jewish and Christian creeds and the codes of the Church discipline. Other studies also show that the anti-Semitic tendencies found in German feminist theology reveal the aversion towards Jewish beliefs and traditions. This is evidenced in the feminist misrepresentation of the Jewish God, their misconception of Jewish womanhood, and the contempt, hatred, and enmity toward Jews.<sup>46</sup> Many of the theologians of the great Universities of Europe and North American could not see how they facilitated Anti-Semitism that would mark the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is astounding in hindsight. As many scholars have pointed

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43. "Free Thought Magazine," in *The Free Thought Magazine*, vol. 16, XVI vols., 6 (Chicago, Illinois: H.L. Green, 1898), <https://tinyurl.com/y555vddc>.

44. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More 1815-1897: Reminiscences* (New York: European Publishing Company, 1898), 381, <https://archive.org/details/cu31924032654315/page/380/mode/2up>.

45. Jewish Virtual Library, "Feminism," Modern Jewish History, 2008, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/feminism>.

46. Gisela Hommel, "Anti-Semitic Tendencies in Christian Feminist Theology in Germany," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, 21, no. 1 (1987): 43-48.

out, the natural logic of extension of Western political logic into the Bible as a mode of universal mode of being human, including gender equality, are loaded with colonial ideas that can create negative inferences when it comes to encountering the global women. Khader's notion of 'missionary feminism,' which we discussed in the introduction of this paper, provide a clear explanation of how Western missionaries carried not only the Bible, but they also brought with them Western values in all of their complexities and ambiguities.

### ***9. Returning to the Changing Ideals of Womanhood Through the Nineteenth Century***

Women's emancipatory movements during the nineteenth century developed several models and representations of womanhood, namely, True Womanhood, Real Womanhood, and New Womanhood. Until 1840s, the ideal form of womanhood in the United States was the "Cult of True Womanhood." This womanhood matches the Victorian womanhood that was prevalent in Europe during the same period. In this womanhood, which is characterized by the qualities of piety, purity, and submissiveness, a woman is bound to be the *angel of the house* who is the *keeper* of morality and decency within the home.<sup>47</sup> This was later replaced by the concept of Real Womanhood which emphasized on health, education, marriage, and employment.<sup>48</sup> But during the 1880s and 1890s, New Womanhood model emerged with an assertion of a woman's right to education and a career that met her personal needs. Contrary to the ideals of True

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47. Susan M Cruea, "Changing Ideals of Womanhood During the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement," *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 19, no. 3 (September 2005): 188, <https://bit.ly/3pOxsLK>.

48. Cruea, 191; Frances B Cogan, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 74–75, 225–26, <https://archive.org/details/allamericangirl0000coga/page/210/mode/2up?q=employment>.

Womanhood, the New Womanhood rejected the values associated with marriage and motherhood, seemingly abandoned the role of wife and motherhood.<sup>49</sup>

By the 1920s, Victorian norms based on sexual concepts had become obsolete for some modernists, who repudiated the old Victorian patterns and prescribed a new liberationist morality that represented a strategic modification of gender roles. Women's reform through higher education and the labor force made the critical perspective about the old sexual order more reasonable for them. This was also the period when the theories of Sigmund Freud and Havelock Ellis heavily influenced the reforms, resulting in a contemporary sexual discourse on sexuality and marriage.<sup>50</sup>

By the early twentieth century, the vision of liberated womanhood gradually infiltrated the mission fields, and thus women's mission rejected all the constraints of Victorian ideals that was opposed to women's liberation. Consequently, the secular notion of egalitarianism supplanted complementarian gender roles that may have been within the missionary movement. The women's civilizing mission during this period also challenged the exclusive male ministry within the Church. The debates of the 1920s on women's ordination, equality, and demand for the reinterpretation of their role within the Church were revived by the 1960s. Thus, the feminist outcry in the west gradually facilitated the Western missionary women to perceive themselves as

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49. Cruea, "Changing Ideals," 200.

50. Christina Simmons, "Modern Sexuality and the Myth of Victorian Repression," in *Gender and American History Since 1890*, ed. Barbara Melosh (London: Routledge, 1993), 18–24, <http://archive.org/details/genderamericanhi0000unse>.

the bearers of superior, moral, spiritual, and asexual qualities to men, which resonated across the mission fields.<sup>51</sup>

### *10. Gender Definitions in the Twentieth Century*

Another development in Western society during the late twentieth century was the reevaluation of gender roles. With the progressions, gender roles and their definitions adopted by the Christian community, particularly among Protestant Evangelicals, clearly correlate to the context of Western society and its liberation struggles. As Linda Wilson states, gender definition is socially construed, and it varies from context to context. Within a particular society, the gender definition defines how men and women in each society ought to function and behave.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, the biblical redefinition of gender roles based on modern biblical critical method, together with the feminist liberation struggle of the period, gradually redefined gender roles that allowed new possibilities for Western women to take roles that were focused on individual freedom.

This is evident in the conservative bible inerrancy theologies which skewed, for local concerns, passages on women's submissiveness. Just as the biblical inerrantist forces social politics on the width of women lived expression in the Bible, so did modern hermeneutical feminists reinterpret the anti-woman biblical passages to liberate women from their subjugated

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51. Jenny Dagers, "The Victorian Female Civilising Mission and Women's Aspirations Towards Priesthood in the Church of England," *Women's History Review*, 10, no. 4 (2001): 651–70.

52. Linda Wilson, "Evangelicals and Gender," in *The Routledge Research Companion to the History of Evangelicalism*, ed. David Ceri Jones and Andrew Atherstone (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 217.

roles. For example, the Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concerns in 1973 and the Evangelical Women’s Caucus in 1975, drew on support from various denominations across the United States and Canada seeking biblical equality.<sup>53</sup> Various publications by Rosemary Radford Ruether, Letty Russel, and Mary Daly were critical of androcentric theology and proposed a Feminist liberation theology.<sup>54</sup>

What is evident here is that Western gender theory and the religious culture, particularly among Protestants, have influenced synchronously and progressed in perfect agreement and as such treated the biblical width of women in the Bible as a simple trope of either submission or emancipation. Even later Evangelical feminists, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, would publish articles and organized social campaigns demanding a restructured form of gender relations focused on equality within the family and Church.<sup>55</sup> But without awareness that it is their culture that is driving the interpretative need but instead both seeing the Bible an ideal universal woman who is in fact local.

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53. United States, The Center for Public Justice, “*The Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern 1973*” (Washington, D.C: The Center for Public Justice, November 25, 1973), [https://www.cpjustice.org/public/page/content/chicago\\_declaration](https://www.cpjustice.org/public/page/content/chicago_declaration); Pamela D. H. Cochran, *Evangelical Feminism A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 14.

54. Letty M Russel, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective: A Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Liberation Theology: Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power* (New York: Paulist Press, 1972); Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, [1st ed.] (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

55. Laurel Zwissler, “Feminism and Religion: Intersections Between Western Activism, Theology and Theory,” *Feminism and Religion*, Religion Compass, 6, no. 7 (2012): 357–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2012.00363.x>.

Eventually, the un-mooring the Bible and its world is complete. By 1986, biblical feminism undergoes a significant transformation. The Re-Imaging Conference, an event sponsored by the World Council of Churches to revise religious traditions and women's roles, began to reimage a new Church. It also envisioned a new Goddess, the feminine side of God named Sophia, and some even questioned the salvific value of Christ's death on the cross. Although several key doctrines were addressed in the conference, the focus was the reinterpretation of Scripture to liberate marginalized women from the domination of patriarchy, thus providing equal opportunity, justice, and inclusivity for all women.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, both highly conservative and highly liberal reinterpretations of Scripture or the discarding of certain components of Scripture they perceived as *anti-woman* submission or anti-cultural passages matched well with the widespread demand for women's social empowerment in the West. And the width of experience or utility of the Bible lessens as other cultures encounter it by having to choose one of the two polarities of the West.

The explosion of women's religious involvement became an opportunity to break away from their traditional restrictive roles fostered by a particular reading of the Bible, for good or bad.<sup>57</sup> The women's mission to Christianize the non-Christian world thus came with contemporary socio-economic, political, and cultural justifications. At the same time, it was ingrained with a racial and anti-Semitic stance towards Christian and Jewish beliefs and cultural practices. It is important to note here that these theological developments prevailing in the

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56. Cochran, *Evangelical Feminism A History*, 110–11.

57. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds., *Women and Religion in America: The Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 3–4.

Global North gradually diffused into the mission fields and in the younger churches in the Global South. Thus, the missionary ideals and policies adopted by the West by the twentieth century became an ideal tool for cultural imperialism over non-Western societies. These ideas when paired with general misconceptions of the non-Western world carried by colonialism mix well and contribute to the special disregard for women in those contexts.

### ***11. Misconceptions About the Non-Western World***

Anthropological studies about the non-Western world were mostly dominated and influenced by varied distorted perceptions and misconceptions that were often determined by the Western cultural context. Anthropologists like Etienne and Leacock have pointed out that Western perceptions of women in non-Western societies were often misguided. According to them, the Victorians saw women in the non-Western world “as, ... ‘oppressed and servile creatures, beasts of burden, chattels who could be bought and sold, eventually to be liberated by civilization or progress, thus attaining an enviable position of women in the Western society.’”<sup>58</sup> Based on these misconceptions and misrepresentations of women in non-Western societies, Christian and native minds in these regions were gradually dominated by the Western concept of an ideal society and its norms and values. This was one key factor that contributed to the development of Western missionaries as the *savior to the rescue* of the women of the Global South. Bosch points out that though the American mission advocates for women’s emancipation, there was a total absence of any ability to be critical about their own cultures or appreciate

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58. Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock, eds., *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspective* (New York: Praeger, 1980), 1.

foreign cultures. They were predisposed not to appreciate the cultures of the world and tended to treat the people from other cultures as objects, thereby reshaping the whole world into the image of the ideal West.<sup>59</sup>

The women's mission to the Global South since the 1880s has been equipped with later developed feminist ideologies, along with modern biblical reinterpretations of gender roles, thus patronizing the Western female missionaries as the caretaker of the women of the Global South. It would be a myth to say that Western mission with its modern definition of gender roles and ideal concept of an egalitarian society brought liberating effects to women in the Global South. The fundamental problem of Western feminism identified here is the ingrained tendency of ethnocentrism, which creates a sense of intrinsic moral superiority over other cultures. This often leads to the imposition of gender ideals based on the Western perspective on non-Western societies resulting in cultural imperialism.

### ***12 The Schism Between the Global North and Global South***

Another factor contributing to the conflicts in ideologies and beliefs is the schism between the Global North and Global South. According to sociologist Philip Jenkins, Christian denominations worldwide are deeply divided over issues of gender, sexual morality, and homosexuality. One of the main issues he identified is the liberalizing tendency widely accommodated by many Northern American and European churches, while their African and Asian counterparts prove to be much more conservative in their stance. The authority and position of the Bible within these cultures is the root cause of the discrepancies found between

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59. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 301.



the Global North and Global South. Jenkins further states that, despite the West's dismissal of the Global South's conservatism because of their backwardness, whether theological or economical, today the Global South triumphs over Western liberalism and progressivism, as the center of Christianity has relocated to the Global South.<sup>60</sup>

In terms of biblical authority, churches in the Global South are very conservative in their approach to the Scripture. This is notable in most churches in the Global South, where scriptural references to women's submissive roles predominate traditional readings of the Bible, and naturally fit into existing traditional gender roles and values. Jenkins points out that the submission texts in the Scriptures, particularly the Pauline texts, support a conservative model of an ideal woman with qualities such as submissiveness and piety and this model is predominant in Protestant and Pentecostal Churches in Korea and Africa.<sup>61</sup>

For instance, in the African context, these texts fit naturally into the African traditional values, especially in determining gender roles within marriage. These societies are comfortable with the patriarchal narrative in Genesis that identifies with biblical gender roles.<sup>62</sup> Another example is from the Indian context, where we observe the centrality of preexisting sacred texts such as the *Vedas*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and *Ramayana*. In a similar manner, the Bible takes a significant place and relates effortlessly among Indian readers. Also, the Bible and its

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60. Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1.

61. Jenkins, 160–61.

62. Jenkins, 160.

descriptions, irrespective of cultural differences in the Global South, relate to common, everyday social and economic realities like poverty and debt, famine, racism, and caste oppression.

### *13 Summary*

The role of women in Western missions and their ideals reflect the socio-economic struggles of women within the Western context. Given the trajectory of Western feminism and feminist theology ingrained with anti-Semitic ideologies along with its broad socioeconomic, religious, and cultural developments that portrayed an ideal universal womanhood as practical for any given society is racist in concept.<sup>63</sup> The West's imposition of its ideal womanhood fails to appreciate the complex patterns of Indigenous thoughts, values, and cultural and religious traditions followed by women in the Global South.

A case study on the Khasi and Garo indigenous tribal societies in Northeast India demonstrates how Western missions to the Global South have had both beneficial and at the same time, detrimental effects on these societies during their various transitions. The study examines how the Western mission's imposition of an ideal egalitarian society and gender roles culturally transformed certain groups within the tribal community, and what are the consequences.

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63 . UNESCO Organization, "Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice" (November 27, 1978), [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=13161&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13161&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).

## Chapter 2: A Case Study on the Khasi and Garo Tribal Communities

The indigenous tribal population, sometimes referred to as First peoples, First nations, or Native peoples, are culturally distinctive from their neighboring communities. Their identity are deeply rooted in the land, and they follow an egalitarian principle of social system in which their sense of balance in the man-woman relationship with their respective rights is a key feature of the indigenous social structure.<sup>64</sup> The tribal groups in the Northeastern states of India is one among such group. These tribal groups who are in the Indian Tribal belt can be broadly classified into two racial stocks- the Austroloid and Mongoloid who are believed to be descended from Tibetan-Himalayan, Burma and Southeast Asia.

The state of Meghalaya, one of the most beautiful in northeast India, lies in the hills of the Eastern Sub-Himalayas, with 70% of its land covered in forests. Most of the population in this state is indigenous tribal population, with the Khasis, Garos, and Jaintias tribes making up the majority of the tribal population. Heide Goettner-Abendroth, a German specialist on matriarchal societies, finds these societies as true-gender-egalitarian and consensus-based society in which women are the central figures. Her role involves maternal values such as caretaking, nurturing, and overall welfare of the community.<sup>65</sup> The tribal population in these regions is 3.44

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64. R.S., *Voices from the Margin*, 118–19.

65. Heide Göttner-Abendroth, “Re-Thinking 'Matriarchy' in Modern Matriarchal Studies Using Two Examples: The Khasi and the Mosuo,” *Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, Asian Journal of Women’s Studies*, 24, no. 1 (2018): 5–6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2017.1421293>.

million, but only 20.07% of the people live in urban regions.<sup>66</sup> Meghalaya, formerly part of the large province of Assam, gained statehood in 1972. The land is divided into three districts: Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia.<sup>67</sup>

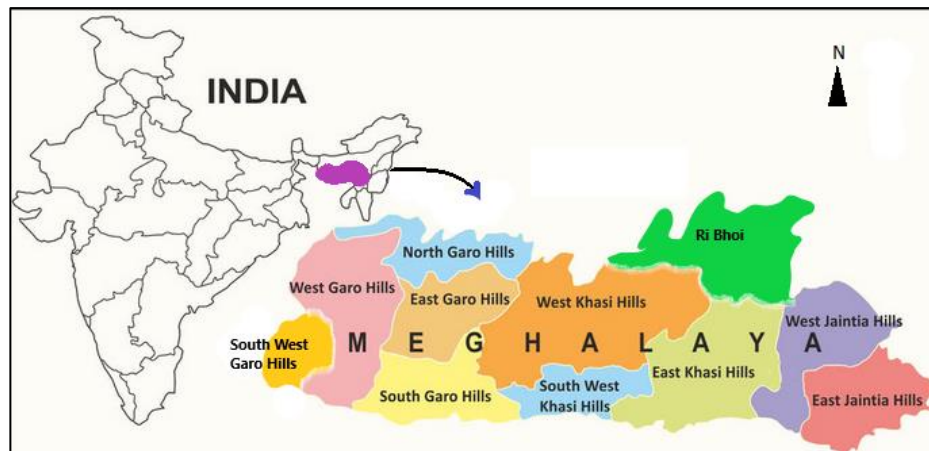


Figure 3. 1 Map of Meghalaya

Kashi Hills and Garo Hills are the two highly elevated districts located in the highlands of Meghalaya. Based on the geographical locations, the tribes in these regions can be broadly divided into two distinctive groups: the hill tribes and the plain tribes. While the Khasi, the largest tribal group, live in the district towards the eastern part of Meghalaya, the Garos, the second largest group, inhabit the western part of Meghalaya known as the Garo Hills. The Khasi and Garos are Tibeto-Burman mountain peoples with Mongolian roots who are believed to have

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66. India Population, “Meghalaya Population 2021,” *PopulationU.com*, 2021, <https://www.populationu.com/in/meghalaya-population>.

67. Frederick S Downs, *North East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, vol. V, *History of Christianity in India* (Bangalore: The Church History Association of India, 1992), 27; Raghavan, “Meghalaya: History, Map, Capital, & Government,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/place/Meghalaya>.

descended from the north of the Himalayas and Tibet.<sup>68</sup> Before the tribes' conversion to Christianity, they were known as headhunters, earning them the title "savage tribes" of North-East India.<sup>69</sup> Garos and Khasis are similar to their neighboring tribes, namely, the Nag, the Kacharee, and other hill tribes, but it is their geographical and historical situation, tribal consciousness, and matrilineal social structure that make them distinct from their neighbors.<sup>70</sup> Today, Meghalaya is one of India's top three Christian majority states with 74.59 percent of its population being Christian, with Baptists, Catholics, and Presbyterians being the most predominant denominations.<sup>71</sup>

### ***1. Early Intervention***

The significance of the Khasi and Garo tribes for this research is inextricably linked to their role in the history of colonialism under British rule, and how these tribes developed under the Western mission into communities that are currently identified with Christianity is crucial here. The history of Meghalaya preceding the British administration is obscure owing to an

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68. Bhattacharjee and Jayanta Bhusan, *The Garos and the English, 1765-1874* (New Delhi, India: Radiant Publishers, 1978), 8; Heide Göttner-Abendroth, *Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures Across the Globe* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 46.

69. Krickwin C Marak, "Christianity Among the Garos: An Attempt to Re-Read Peoples' Movement from a Missiological Perspective," in *Christianity in India: Search for Liberation and Identity*, by F Hrangkhuma (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 155.

70. Chie Nakane, *Garo and Khasi: A Comparative Study in Matrilineal Systems*, Cahiers de l'Homme, Nouvelle Serie 5 (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2019), 23, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111330167>.

71. Dyron B Daugherty and Jesudas M Athyal, *Understanding World Christianity: India* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 198; India Population, "Meghalaya Population 2021."

absence of accounts and evidence from the ancient tribal kingdoms. The political and administrative landscape of North-East India changed dramatically following the Anglo-Burmese War, and it was the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 that marked the beginning of British penetration into northeast India.<sup>72</sup>

The development of British policy in the North-eastern states of India began with the annexation of the lower Assam in 1828, which provided the British with a foothold to expand and subjugate the tribal regions of the Cachar, Jayantia, and Khasi Hills.<sup>73</sup> Up until 1874, Assam was a non-regulated territory within the administrative structure of Bengal. However, with the annexation of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills that was consummated in 1874, Assam was constituted as a separate British province. In addition, the relocation of the British headquarters from Cherrapunji to Shillong in the same year set the perfect ground for British political infiltration into these tribal populations.<sup>74</sup>

The inclusion of the Christian mission into the colonial quest was influenced by several factors including economic, political, and religious contexts of the Western world. The modern missions under imperialism thus were mostly focused on the expansion of Western modernity and civilization into the non-Western world. For the British, the indigenous populations of these regions, particularly the Garos, were identified as ‘savages’ and ‘barbarians;’ therefore, the need

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72. Downs, *History of Christianity in India*, V:6–7.

73. Priyam Goswami, *The History of Assam From Yandabo to Partition 1826-1947* (Telangana, India: Orient BlackSwan, 2012), 1–2.

74. Nakane, *Garo and Khasi*, 97; Downs, *History of Christianity in India*, V:16–18.

to ‘civilize’ them through Christianization became seen as crucial.<sup>75</sup> Second, British revenues were insufficient to cover the administrative expenditures needed to maintain the tribal communities. Under such circumstances, the Christian mission became the ideal tool to exercise British ‘indirect rule,’ to subjugate the tribe and to pacify the hostile hill tribes and educate them. Subsequently, the state oversaw the basic law and order, while the missions were granted secured access to these communities to provide education as part of the ‘civilization’ process.<sup>76</sup> This shows that there was a close alliance between the colonial power and the Christian mission that collaborated in certain areas where their mutual interests overlapped.

Despite the British commissions for Christian missions and their romanticism about the “noble savage,” it was David Scott and Francis Jenkins, the two dominant British commissioners influenced under William Carey, who encouraged tribal conversion and education.<sup>77</sup> David Scott, after establishing a subsequent administration policy in the northeast, pioneered the Garo mission in association with the Serampore mission.<sup>78</sup> In 1854, with state support, educational activities among the Khasi and Garo tribes were established. However, due to meager revenues to maintain

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75. Bhattacharjee and Bhusan, *The Garos and the English, 1765-1874*, 237.

76. Jayeeta Sharma, Dick Pratt, and Yongseok Seo, *Empire’s Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (Duke University Press, 2011), 201–2; Robert Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present*, Oxford History of the Christian Church (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 446.

77. Downs, *History of Christianity in India*, V:33–36.

78. Downs, V:34–35.

the expenditure, as well as the state's withdrawal of financial support, the task of educating and civilizing the tribes was left solely with the Church.<sup>79</sup>

## ***2. The Christian Missions***

The history of Christianity in these regions began with the Jesuits in 1627, followed by William Carey, a British Baptist missionary who arrived in India in 1793 and established the Serampore mission in Bengal. Serampore thus became the locus for missionary activities in the neighboring regions. The introduction of the Charter Act of 1813, which officially established the practice of Christianity in India, attracted many other Christian denominations to establish their respective missions in these regions.<sup>80</sup>

It was the Baptists of Serampore who initiated the nineteenth-century missionary interest in Assam and Meghalaya, which spanned from 1816 until 1837.<sup>81</sup> Even though the Serampore mission under David Scott established a school in Guwahati in 1829, the missionary efforts were short-lived due to a shortage of personnel and a retrenchment following the Serampore mission's amalgamation with the Baptist Missionary Society in 1837–38.<sup>82</sup>

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79. Downs, V:52–53.

80. Daugherty and Athyal, *Understanding World Christianity*, 37–38.

81. Downs, *History of Christianity in India*, V:64–65.

82. Downs, V:67–68.



Following Serampore, the American Baptist Missionary Union, along with the Welsh Presbyterians, carried on the region's major missions throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>83</sup> The American Baptist Mission and Welsh Presbyterian Mission were the first two permanent Protestant missions in Assam, and today two-thirds of Northeast tribal Christians trace their roots to these two missions. The Christian missions that worked specifically in these regions include the Serampore Baptist Mission (1813–38), Welsh Calvinistic Methodists' Foreign Mission (from 1841 until the present date), Catholic Mission (1890 until the present date), and other independent missions.<sup>84</sup> The history of Christian mission in Northeast India, particularly in Assam, took form under various denominations such as the British Baptist mission, Jesuits Catholic mission, Seventh Day Adventists, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Anglican, and American Baptist mission and various other charismatic and independent groups. Today, Christianity is identified as the most popular religion in Meghalaya, with a Christian population of 2.213,027 million, which constitutes about 74.59% of the state's total population.<sup>85</sup>

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83. Downs, V:68–69 American Baptist Missionary Union was later renamed as the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, and it served as the champion for various societies including Women's American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, the Board of International Ministries, American Baptist Churches, thus bringing together the women's societies.

84. Joseph Puthenpurakal, "Christianity and Mass Movement Among the Khasis: A Catholic Perspective," in *Christianity in India: Search for Liberation and Identity*, by F Hrangkhuma (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 202–7.

85. India Population, "Meghalaya Population 2021."

### *3. The Impact of Christian Mission Among the Khasi and Garo*

With the introduction of Christianity in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, its growth has been so fast that, today, Christianity can be rightfully identified as the Khasi and Garo religion. The conversion of the Khasi began in the 1850s and for the Garos in the 1860s.<sup>86</sup> Following the British annexation of the Khasi Hills, and the influx of Christian missions, the traditional Khasi religion and culture suffered a slow decline. The first mission among the tribes began in the 1813s by Krishna Chandra Pal, a native evangelist, under the Serampore Baptist mission. But the mission was short-lived owing to prosecutions and various other political factors. In 1841, the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist mission (later to become the Welsh Presbyterian) assigned Rev. Thomas Jones and his wife, to resume the mission work.<sup>87</sup> After years of slow progress, momentum dramatically increased between 1905- 06 when the great Khasi revivals broke out and eventually surged to a more rapid expansion mostly under indigenous leadership.<sup>88</sup>

The spiritual awakening that occurred in Wales from 1904 to 1906 had a direct impact on these regions due to direct links between the Welsh missionaries and their mission station in the Khasi Hills.<sup>89</sup> The missionaries introduced a lifestyle that was entirely new to the tribal communities. Because of variations in dialects among the tribes, the missionaries developed a unified dialect, introduced well-structured pieces of literature, published books, established well-

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86. Frykenberg, *Christianity in India*, 445.

87. Frykenberg, 445–46.

88. Frykenberg, 447.

89. Daugherty and Athyal, *Understanding World Christianity*, 44.

organized church administration, and provided medical service, thus introducing the tribes to a new modern civilization with a new culture and identity.<sup>90</sup>

Like the Khasi's political history, the history of Christianity among the Garo began with the colonizers. David Scott, a British officer, took charge of the Garo affairs in 1816. To bring the Garo to a better way of life, Scott established formal education along with the spiritual force of Christianizing the Garos. Despite several failed attempts and severe opposition from the tribes, Scott's vision eventually took form only after his death in 1831. The growth of Christianity among the Garos was not smooth, and it wavered for various reasons. By 1876, Christian mission took shape in the Garo Hills with the arrival of the American Baptist missionaries, along with the significant work of indigenous converts Omed Momin and Ramkhe Momin.<sup>91</sup> Despite the slow progress, the mission was finally established with the opening of developmental programs such as schools, hospitals, and agro-industrial workshops as well as introducing the Bible and other literary works published in vernacular language.<sup>92</sup> Thus, a new community with its own set of values and codes based on biblical values was established. The early missionaries introduced new Christian ethos that eradicated the tribal cultural practices including headhunting, inter-tribal warfare, animal sacrifices, alcoholism, and slavery. Through

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90. O.L Snaitang, "Christianity Among the Khasis: A Protestant Perspective," in *Christianity in India: Search for Liberation and Identity*, by F Hrangkhuma (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), 238.

91. Joseph Thomas, "*An Emerging Tribal Christian Community Dialogue Between Garo Culture and Christianity*" (National Digital Library of India, n.d.), 50, <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/278048>.

92. Marak, "Christianity Among the Garos," 156–67.

conversion to Christianity, and reformation through educational infrastructures and developmental programs, the early missionaries introduced the tribal communities to a civilized life. Female formal education taken up by the women missionaries was a significant contribution to the tribal reform.

#### ***4. The Role of the Bible as Sola Scriptura***

One of the key factors responsible for making Christianity easily adaptable into these cultures was the preexisting traditional tribal belief system. A common presumption about tribal religions in northeast India is described as primitive animism. A primitive religion believes in a monotheistic high god or supreme being who is the creator and sustainer of everything.<sup>93</sup> The Animists believe in a supernatural power that lies at the heart of primitive religion, and the Bible, similarly, came to be regarded as the Holy Scripture of Supreme God.<sup>94</sup> Today, these tribes share the Christian faith by accepting the authoritative status of the Bible as *Sola Scriptura*, an inerrant and infallible source of the rule of faith and practice.<sup>95</sup> In addition to this, the tribal values

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93. Thomas, "An Emerging Tribal Christian," 162; J. Fortis Jyrwa, "Christianity in Khasi Culture: A Study of the Relationship Between Christianity and Traditional Khasi Culture with Special Reference to the Seng Khasi Movement from 1899 to 1983 (India)" (D.Mis., United States -- California, Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission, n.d.), 77–78, <http://www.proquest.com/docview/303348553/abstract/6D03DA2A2B584BE4PQ/1>; Puthenpurakal, "Christianity and Mass Movement Among the Khasis: A Catholic Perspective," 198.

94. K. Thanzauva and Hnuni R.L, "Ethnicity, Identity and Hermeneutics: An Indian Tribal Perspective," in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, by Brett Mark G (Boston: Brill academic Publishers, 2002), 346.

95. Renty Keitzar, "Tribal Perspective in Biblical Hermeneutics Today," *Indian Journal of Theology*, 31, no. 3/4 (1982): 308.

represented in the Bible made it easier for these tribes to adapt to the Christian faith, causing them to abandon their old order concerning the propitiation to the evil spirits and other ritual practices.

For the tribal Christians, questioning the validity, authorship, and their traditional interpretations of the Scripture means challenging God Himself.<sup>96</sup> Natives' opposition to the liberal, rational, and unorthodox approach to the Bible by the modern Western missionaries was evident even during the 1860s.<sup>97</sup> A letter from Prenshon Kharlukhi, an indigenous missionary from the Shillong, exemplifies this concept by emphasizing the importance of the Bible among the tribal group. Kharlukhi states, "... the people have been preaching and practicing the New Testament pattern of Christianity for nearly twenty years not by having preachers of the churches of Christ from America, not by reading books on religious fields, but by reading the Bible and the Bible only with [sic] only sincere desire to do the will of God."<sup>98</sup>

The striking similarity between the Indian tribal values and biblical tribal values is what makes the Bible so unique and adaptable for these tribes. Renty Keitzar, a northeastern theologian, illustrates this in his explication of the tribal perspective in biblical hermeneutics. He states that the tribal worldview is analogous to the Hebrew worldview in many aspects. He points

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96. Wandahilin Kharlukhi, *East-West Cultural Synthesis: Toward a Cosmic Pneumatic Christology for Indigenous Khasi Christianity of Northeast India* (Berkeley, California, n.d.), 176.

97. D. Ben Rees, ed., *Vehicles of Grace and Hope: Welsh Missionaries in India, 1800-1970* (William Carey Library, 2002), 163.

98. Clinton Brazle, "A Church Growth Study of Churches in North East India" (Abilene Christian University, 1977), 52, <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/etd/44/>.

out that Hebrew primitivism, with its practical and concrete way of thinking, allows the tribal mind to relate to nature, natural forces, and supernatural powers. Rather than the Western concept of interpretation, Keitzar claims, it is the direct tribal method of interpretation of the Old and New Testament that makes it advantageous for the tribes.<sup>99</sup>

Secondly, North-eastern tribal solidarity relates to both the New Testament concept of Christian unity in Christ and the Old Testament socio-cultural organization of ancient Israel as a society with a strong sense of solidarity and communal oneness. The structure of kinship relationships represented in the Bible relates well with the northeastern pattern of kinship relationships such as family, clan, and individual roles. In addition, the tribal belief in a supreme god resonates with biblical monotheism. As a result, many pre-Christian socio-religious concepts become more meaningful when it comes to interpreting the Bible and the Christian faith for the north-eastern tribal Christians.<sup>100</sup>

Another important feature is the Old Testament representation of an egalitarian model of tribal society, which is based on the values of “anti-greed” and “anti-pride.”<sup>101</sup> Greed and pride are the capital original sins for Indian tribes, and hence the values of “anti-greed and anti-pride”

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99. Keitzar, “Tribal Perspective in Biblical Hermeneutics Today,” 310.

100. Keitzar, 310–11.

101. R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, New ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 120–23.

contrast sharply with “pride of the caste and greed of consumerism”, which largely define the factors responsible for social oppression and economic exploitation in Indian society.<sup>102</sup>

Similarly, the New Testament representation of an alternative community founded by Christ is based on the same principles of “anti-greed and anti-pride,” where the lifestyle and function aim to establish an egalitarian community free from self-assertion and greed.<sup>103</sup> Thus, the northeastern tribal communitarian life contributes to the Christian understanding of community, where the tribal collective interests are elevated above those of the individualistic ideals found in the West.<sup>104</sup> Ancient Israel as a confederation of tribes with a unique monotheistic religion, socio-political egalitarian system, anti-greed and anti-pride social order, and the biblical concept of a corporate body in the body of Christ (Romans 12:4-5), equates to tribal solidarity, making biblical hermeneutics more meaningful for the northeastern tribes.

Though many attributes cultural change to conversions, studies reveal that the only aspects the early missionaries forbade were polygamy, incest, alcohol consumption, child marriage, adultery, and other types of social problems. Moreover, Sangma, a Garo expert, notes

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102. Paulus Kullu, “Tribal Religion and Culture,” 24, *Jeevadhara*, no. 140 (1994): 89–109. According to the tribal creation myth, greed and pride caused the mythical flood and the rain of fire, which are the symbols of death and destruction'.

103. R.S., *Voices from the Margin*, 120–26.

104. K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making* (Mizo Theological Conference, 1997), 109, 112–13, <https://books.google.ca/books?id=GyVIPAAACAAJ>.

that despite certain alterations brought about by Christianity in response to prevailing social problems, the core features of their culture, customs, and traditional practices remained intact.<sup>105</sup>

Today, tribal Christians are confronted by the modern mission shaped by Western culture and Western theology as well as its modern biblical eisegesis. They hold strongly to Bible inerrancy and object any modern critical approach to biblical hermeneutics. Sugirtharajah clearly pointed out that when these Western historical-critical methods are applied to a non-Western context, they tend to become the symbols and products of Western culture. He associates modern biblical criticism to colonialism, which he defines as, “not simply a system of economic and military control, but a systematic cultural penetration and domination.”<sup>106</sup> It is thus colonial in the sense that it imposes its own set of standards as the universally applicable method and tools, thus disqualifying and displacing indigenous hermeneutical methods.<sup>107</sup>

### ***5. The Sociocultural Background of the Tribal Groups***

To fully understand the sociocultural transformations and the impact of Christianization, one must first understand the social systems, societal norms, and structural functionalism in the Khasi and Garo communities. Unlike many other societies, the tribal way of life is barely influenced by the patriarchal system that is preponderantly identified in many other societies, and this is one reason for their distinctive gender roles. The similarities between the Khasi and the Garo are seen at the level of the matrilineal system’s specific functionalities such as—

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105. Marak, “Christianity Among the Garos,” 184.

106. R.S., *Voices from the Margin*, 460.

107. R.S., 460–61.



inheritance succession and ownership by women, while the absolute governing power lies with the men. While these groups share common characteristics, they also differ in some ways. Nevertheless, this study focuses on how the Khasi and Garo unified as a cohesive society under the context of Christianity and colonialism as well as how their social-cultural aspects have altered under its development.

### ***6. The Khasi family structure***

The traditional Khasis society consists of a clan, known as a *Kur*, and several *kurs* form consanguine kin groups in which all the members trace their ancestry to a common mythical grandmother who is the progenitor. The *Kur* is subdivided into *Jaits* or sub-Clans, which are further subdivided into *kpoh* or lineage, which in turn are subdivided into several *ling* families or houses.<sup>108</sup> In this case, the clan or sub-clan is formed through over-grown families and lineages that are often cyclical. The clan, as the exogamous unit, performs various religious, economic, judicial, and political functions through its council known as the *Durbar Kur*. Even though succession to the clan head and clan elders comes from the female line, succession to these political offices is available only to men.<sup>109</sup>

The basic functional unit of the Khasi clan, the *ling* or house, keeps the ancestral property and performs religious ceremonies. The matrilineal system of the Khasis is based on matrilineal residence and matrilineal descent through the family's youngest daughter or *khadduh*, which

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108. J. S. Bhandari, *Kinship and Family in North-East India* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1996), 350.

109. Bhandari, 360–62.

implies that the family or the married couple resides within the residence of the wife's mother's household, and the ancestral property is devolved through the female line.<sup>110</sup> In the Khasi system, the custodian, manager, and authoritarian of the ancestral property of the *ling*, i.e., natal family, is the oldest maternal uncle or *kni-rangbah*; in his absence, the eldest brother of the house takes up his role.<sup>111</sup>

### ***7. The Garos family structure***

Like the Khasi, the Garos also follow matrilineal social organization, divisions, and subdivisions. Based on its geographic location, the Garo clan or *Chatchi* is further subdivided into hundreds of sub-clans called *machong* or 'motherhood.' The Garo also claim a common ancestress, and their ancestry and succession of inheritance are passed down through female lineage.<sup>112</sup> Cross-cousin marriage is one of the key features that differentiate the Garos from the Khasi. It is an essential part of the Garo's social structure, whereas in the Khasi there are many prohibitions of marriage between near kin from both paternal as well as maternal sides.<sup>113</sup> Garo marriages are arranged between two localized lineage groups by exchanging menfolk. As a result, every member has his or her spouse as a cross-cousin, either patrilateral or matrilateral.<sup>114</sup> In short, a Garo house/*nok*, is based on the marital relationships that exist between the two

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110. Bhandari, 363–64.

111. Bhandari, 363–64.

112. Thomas, "An Emerging Tribal Christian," 36–37.

113. Nakane, *Garo and Khasi*, 118.

114. Nakane, 43.

lineages. Through cross-cousin marriage, the father becomes the head of nok, while the mother becomes the owner of nok.<sup>115</sup> As a result, the residence pattern of Garo cross-cousin marriage is not only uxori-local but also avunculocal.

### ***8. Traditional Gender Roles Among Khasis***

#### *a) The Khasi women*

‘Khasi’ means ‘born of the mother’ (*Kha* means ‘born,’ and *si* refers to ‘ancient mother’), hence it also defines her role not just as progenitor of the clan, but also authorizes her to be the owner of the clan’s property and to oversee the social, religious and economic welfare for the sustenance of the whole clan.<sup>116</sup> Khasi women occupy a prominent role in the domestic sphere, which is dedicated to household duties, assisting in farming during harvest season, and the added responsibility of trading in the market. Men’s prohibition from these responsibilities plainly shows their gendered classification and functions.<sup>117</sup> The youngest daughter as the successor of the ancestral property becomes the owner, which equally comes with the responsibilities of taking care of her family.

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115. Nakane, 46–47.

116. K Kusum and Parvinrai Mulwantrai Bakshi, *Customary Law and Justice in the Tribal Areas of Meghalaya* (N.M. Tripathi, 1982), 75; Bhandari, *Kinship and Family in North-East India*, 362–63.

117. Heide Göttner-Abendroth, *Societies of Peace: Matriarchies Past, Present and Future: Selected Papers, First World Congress on Matriarchal Studies* (Toronto, ON: Inanna Publications, 2009), 197–98.

*b) The Khasi men*

According to Mawrie, a prominent writer on Khasi civilization and religion, the Khasi man has a crucial role in their religion. His personal life is deeply intertwined with the clan, and he is duty-bound to himself, his family, and the clan.<sup>118</sup> As a father to his children and a maternal uncle to his clan's family, he bears the responsibilities of a caretaker.<sup>119</sup> Besides serving as the clan head and maternal uncle, he is also the manager of the property, performs the clan's religious rites, and guides the social and daily affairs of the village as its ruler.<sup>120</sup>

The naming ceremony of the newborn serves as a perfect example of Khasis' gender stereotypes, which include both descriptive and prescriptive components as well as traditions about how people of both genders should act as members of the community. The male child is presented with a small bow and three arrows, symbolizing his role as an administrator, priest, and protector of himself, his family, and his clan. For a female child, the placement of a betel nut, large blade, sling basket and *u star* (a rope she hangs on her head to carry the basket in) symbolizes her duty as a woman to look after the welfare of the family.<sup>121</sup> The marital relationship, according to Mawrie, is based on the assigned status, duties and obligatory roles

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118. H. Onderson Mawrie, *The Khasi Milieu* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1981), 51.

119. Mawrie, 57.

120. Mawrie, 91.

121. K Kusum and Bakshi, *Customary Law*, 33; Thomas, "An Emerging Tribal Christian," 109.

that each person must perform; neither of these roles has a lower position than the other.<sup>122</sup> It is, therefore, undeniable that the Khasi clan system is based on a natural balance of power between male and female and that they function in two separate spheres.

### ***9. Traditional Gender Roles Among the Garo***

As with the Khasi, the Garo have similar roles and a surprisingly similar structural functionalism, with a natural balance of gender role and power between the males and females within their system.<sup>123</sup> The Garo social system prescribes a clear division of gender-based duties and functions for both sexes. Men perform intense labor with high-risk factors, whereas women focus on domestic and family responsibilities. Even in their traditional rituals and religious practices, this distinction is effectively maintained.<sup>124</sup> The gender roles among Garos also reveal a clear division of spheres, with both Garo men and women doing their designated tasks with well-balanced, equal power.<sup>125</sup> It is interesting to point out that the gender discrimination, divorce, mistreatment, and exploitation of women among the Garos are rare.<sup>126</sup>

With an illustration of the Garo home, we can understand the cultural definition of Garo's gender-based divisions and roles within their home. The house is divided into three main sections. The first room from the entrance, usually the ground floor, is used for sheltering the

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122. Mawrie, *The Khasi Milieu*, 66.

<sup>123</sup> Thomas, "An Emerging Tribal Christian," 155.

124. Thomas, 156.

125. Thomas, 158.

126. Thomas, 157.

cattle. The upper floor consists of a large hall that is reserved mainly for men. Women prepare their meals on a separate fireplace or cooking hearth strictly reserved for women that is located close to the men's room.<sup>127</sup>

Summary: The study on the Khasi and Garo tribes shows that their tribal culture adheres to a traditional form of customs and practices, and their rituals and practices clearly demonstrates their structural functionalism within their clans. Both the men and women are assigned gender-specific roles within the clans. Neither of the roles has a lower position than the other. There is a clear division of gender-based roles and powers. Both man and woman function based on the assigned status and roles that each person must perform from two distinctive and separate spheres. While the family inheritance succession and ownership is by women, the absolute governing and decision-making power lies with men. These customs, practices and structural functionalism are similar to the headship complementarianism. Hence, the gender roles and distinctions maintained by these tribes are in opposition to the Western feminist egalitarian model. In the Western egalitarian model, both men and women share equal roles and responsibilities within the home and society, and this ideal was and is propagated through the missions. As far as the tribes are concerned, the Western notion of equality by minimizing gender differences is an intrusion into the tribes' traditional structure and functions.

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127. Nakane, *Garo and Khasi*, 40–41.

### Chapter 3 Impact of Western Christian Missionary Women

The arrival of the Western missionaries was the primary factor responsible for the exposure of Khasi and Garo women to modern civilization. To explain how missionary efforts influenced and shaped tribal Khasi and Garo women, we need to understand Zenana missions and the role of missionary women among these tribes. The establishment of mission schools and the introduction of Roman/Latin script among these tribes made the Bible more accessible to these tribal people, thus allowing an effective means for teaching and imparting knowledge of new Christian values and principles to these women. Other methods used by the missionaries to evangelize these tribes included conducting bible classes, worship services, prayer meetings, and visits to the nearby villages. These methods provided the means to introduce the tribal communities to a new civilization.<sup>128</sup>

Along with moral and religious training to counteract the tribal home and social influence, a key principle adopted by the mission during the 1880s was to educate women not to be like men, but to become better women as per biblical standards.<sup>129</sup> This principle is well adopted by women missionaries, and it is significant in their gender-specific roles followed in the mission fields. An example from one of the papers presented at the American Baptist Missionary Union in Assam in 1886 clearly defines the qualities and designation of a woman missionary. The prescribed role accords her with the position of helpmate of a man with all the

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128. Jyrwa, "Christianity in Khasi Culture," 22, 121, 128.

129 E. G. Phillips, "The Assam Jubilee Conference.," *Baptist Missionary Magazine* (Boston, United States: American Periodicals Series II, April 1887), 180, <https://tinyurl.com/4r9aufkj>.

qualities of a noblewoman that are explicitly outlined in the Book of Proverbs. She must train young women to take a submissive role and to live a life of self-sacrifice by fulfilling the obligatory household duties and supporting their husband's work.<sup>130</sup>

Other criteria required for the early missionary men and women were biblical training and a strong commitment to a high spiritual vocation to spread the Gospel. They were trained and qualified for the mission based on their strong spirituality, which was akin to Apostolic life and zeal.<sup>131</sup> The biblical definition of a missionary's wife is therefore one who is home-centered, has a missionary spirit and is well prepared for the call, which correlates well with the Pauline theology on women (Titus 2:4-5). This explains how, in the 1880s, early missions and missionary practices firmly conformed to strict gender roles, which also matched Victorian gender ideals. It is important to note here that these Victorian and biblical gender ideals followed and taught by the early missionaries hardly threatened the already existing gender specific distinctions of these tribes.

### ***1. The Social Developmental Missions***

By the late nineteenth century, the progress of Western civilization, combined with the women's emancipation movements, brought a significant transition in the mission world. It awakened missionary women to the suffering of women in both the Western and non-Western worlds. This eventually led to a surge in the need for professionally trained and competent

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130. Phillips, 180, 203–10.

131. George Smith, *The Conversion of India: From Pantaeus to the Present Time AD 193-1893* (London: John Murray, 1893), 172–75, [https://rarebooksocietyofindia.org/postDetail.php?id=196174216674\\_10155020149071675](https://rarebooksocietyofindia.org/postDetail.php?id=196174216674_10155020149071675).



women who were committed to the cause of the emancipation of women in the non-Western world. By 1910, single women made up the majority of American missionary efforts, and their ideas for women in the non-Western world were greatly influenced by the policies of the Student Volunteer Movement.<sup>132</sup>

Influenced by women's emancipatory ideals and similar policies adopted by missionary boards, the women serving in overseas missions believed they as women held an exalted position in American culture, particularly in American Protestant Christianity. Based on their perceived superiority, they construed women in Asian and Middle Eastern societies as downtrodden, impoverished, and subjugated by their patriarchal traditions, and this eventually drove them to the desire to confer greater social status on them.<sup>133</sup>

Subsequently, by the late nineteenth century, the mission's approach to Indian women was more committed to altering the cultural norms they perceived as oppressive to Indian women.<sup>134</sup> Thus, by the 1900s, the missionary woman's passive role as a wife supporting her husband's missionary work had significantly changed and was replaced by professionally trained single women with a sense of 'social mission' to educate and uplift Indian women.

The mission rhetoric during this period often depicted Indian women and girls as inferior, being "sunk in such depths of degraded ignorance," and illiterate. The condition of womankind

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132. Hill, *The World*, 170–73.

133. Leslie A. Flemming, "A New Humanity: American Missionaries' Ideals for Women in North India, 1870-1930," in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, ed. Margaret Strobel and Nupur Chaudhuri (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 191–92, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/002545078>.

134. Flemming, 10.

in the East was “destitute and desolate;” hence, it drew the attention and sympathy of the whole civilized world. This laid the foundation for women’s missions, emphasizing the need to liberate, educate and evangelize the ‘other women’ through Western values.<sup>135</sup> The Zenana missions, which formerly were associated with women’s mission among women from an evangelical perspective, were diversified to a broader spectrum equipped with professionals to provide education and social services for the upliftment of Indian women based on a new modern Western perspective.

## ***2. The Zenana Missions in India***

A study of how the Zenana missions were formed, and their implicit association with Western social-political developments of the time, gives a clear explanation about how these contextual factors infiltrated into the mission fields. The zenana system of outreach programs were established in British India with the aim to reach women who were secluded within their homes. Women were isolated from outside society and access to them in the private areas of their home, which is known as zenana, were prohibited to outside men missionaries. Popularization of zenana education system created a demand for female missionaries willing to work in India.<sup>136</sup> The Zenana missions in India became the leading factor for the formation of an

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135. “The Missionary Review of the World: The Spiritual Movements of the Century-Oman’s Work at Home and Abroad,” in *The Missionary Review of the World*, vol. 20 Part 2 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Press, 1897), 642–45, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/009793630>.

136. Fiona Bowie, Deborah Kirkwood, and Shirley Ardener, eds., *Women and Missions: Past and Present- Anthropological and Historical Perceptions* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 1993), 199–200.

undenominational mission society for women called the Woman's Union Missionary Society in America. The society, which was founded in 1861, was the first to parent several denominational Women's Boards and other Christian organizations that supported women missionaries in the mission fields.<sup>137</sup> It is worth noting here that the entry of Zenana work into India in the 1860s coincided with the arrival of single women into the London Mission Society as missionaries.<sup>138</sup>

By the 1880s, Zenana work had become more stable and widespread, providing a variety of services for women. However, studies show that these missions often had racial aspects towards indigenous missionaries and communities.<sup>139</sup> Nevertheless, by 1890, there were around 40,513 houses accessible by the Zenana women in India.<sup>140</sup> The mission's ethos was revitalized; it was no longer just evangelical, but also gendered, with the intent to impose colonial modernity on the indigenous women by opposing the Indian joint family system, their ideal gender roles, and imposing a Westernized model of womanhood, the nuclear family system, and social structures.<sup>141</sup> Based on the missionaries' vision of an ideal egalitarian society for India, the Zenana mission in every sense was closely interlinked with the goal of civilizing and elevating native women along the lines of the Western model of an egalitarian society.

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137. "The Missionary Review," 645–46.

138. Archives Hub, "Church of England, Zenana Missionary Society, Records of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society, 1872-1968," n.d., 26, <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/data/gb150-cez>.

139. Sen, *Gendered Transactions*, 27.

140. Smith, *The Conversion*, 205.

141. Sen, *Gendered Transactions*, 26–28; Smith, *The Conversion*, 205.

The Western missionaries, profoundly disturbed by Indian culture and social organization, approached Indian society with a reformist intent. The comparison of the Indian women's *degraded status* with the elevated status of American women naturally gave them a sense of superiority over the *other*. It is also worth noting that these missionaries left their homeland at a time when the political and social demands of suffragists were being debated, which bolstered their position and appeal for a change in Indian societal norms.

### ***3. Female Missionaries' Revised Values for Native Women***

The missionary women in general engaged in four spheres of activities reflecting the Board of Foreign Missions' policy. These were included running schools, providing Western medical care to women and girls, and Zenana visitations. Despite the Presbyterian ban on women's public preaching, they often engaged in public preaching.<sup>142</sup>

While missionaries laid out a set of liberating values for Indian women of all castes and communities, the values for Indian Christian women were primarily focused on the liberated form of Christian femininity and the needs of the Indian church. Consequently, the new image of Christian womanhood, combined with participation in the church, encouraged a partial liberation from the indigenous constraints on women, further strengthening their sense of themselves as agents of change, and thus, inspired the Indian Christian women to assume new social roles.<sup>143</sup> The missionaries steered these women and girls into more visible activist roles by urging them to accept a set of ideals that would allow them to serve as agents of change for women in the late

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142. Flemming, *A New Humanity*, 193–94.

143. Flemming, 199–200.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the early missionaries' conformity to the concept of domesticity did not allow them to advocate for extreme radical change to the Indian social structure, and they instead reinforced the Indian women's passivity.<sup>144</sup>

#### ***4. Similarities Between Early Missionary Women and Indian Women***

Another factor observed is that married missionary women of the early evangelical period and Indian women had a lot in common. Studies show that the gender norms for women in early evangelical missions conformed to the Victorian gender convention of a separate domestic sphere. Kara Lynne Pickens in her study proves that Victorian femininity embodied the biblical symbols of female figures, allowing Victorian women to revise restrictive and constraining gender categories within the Victorian social imaginaries.<sup>145</sup> Women's public roles were to serve as helpmates to their husbands, conforming to the biblical subordination role.<sup>146</sup> Both the Indian women and early evangelical missionary women were economically dependent on their spouses and had certain assigned domestic duties that confined them to their homes, thus restricting them from taking on any public religious roles. Correspondingly, the married missionary women of the early evangelical period through their Zenana visits legitimated and reinforced the seclusion of Indian women within their domestic sphere. The gender roles modelled by the missionaries

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144. Flemming, 203.

145. Pickens, "*The Reinterpretation*," 120–21.

146. Mary Taylor Huber and Nancy C Lutkehaus, eds., "Gendered Missions at Home and Abroad," in *Gendered Missions: Women and Men in Missionary Discourse and Practice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 42–43, <http://archive.org/details/genderedmissions0000unse>.

scarcely challenged the prevailing Indian social norms of that period. The missionary women of the early Victorian period thus produced little concrete social change among the Indian communities compared to the single missionary women of the late nineteenth century.<sup>147</sup> This is one aspect that made early missionary efforts more effective among the Indian women, particularly among the Khasi and Garo women who were strict observants of traditional roles and thus avoided any possible conflicts during the early missionary period.

### ***5. The Challenge to the Traditional Woman's Role***

Unlike the early missionary women, the single missionary women in the late nineteenth century created the potential for significant social change in women's lives through mission schools. The mission schools were the means for the Indian women to attain new social and economic goals. The missionaries as role models of educated women dedicated their task to the building up of the Indian church through the creation of educated women's leadership.<sup>148</sup> Thus, the late-nineteenth century's gendered foreign missions were explicitly designed to equip non-Western women to be professionally competent and have dignity and equality as per the Western perspective.

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147. Leslie A. Flemming, "New Models, New Roles: U.S. Presbyterian Women Missionaries and Social Change in North India 1870-1910," in *Women's Work for Women: Missionaries and Social Change in Asia* (Boulder Colo.: Westview Press, 1989), 48–49, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001534423>; Huber and Lutkehaus, "Gendered Missions at Home and Abroad," 42–43.

148. Flemming, *New Models*, 48–49; Huber and Lutkehaus, "Gendered Missions at Home and Abroad," 42–43.

Now the outcomes of the progressive Western mission among the Khasi and Garo tribes are varied. Modern studies constrained by Western feminist thought tend to advocate the idea of equality and women's empowerment by constructing misconceptions and biased interpretations of Khasi and Garo women based on their structural functionalism. Some represent the tribal women as the governing authority, positioned over men by empowering their positions in the social, religious, and economic sphere.<sup>149</sup> Others based on the tribal women's central role as the custodian of family property as well as the facilitator of religious rites, confer the tribal women with a dominant role. Contrary to this, few others argue that tribal women lack empowerment since they are excluded from making major decisions within their families, and from participation in local and national politics.<sup>150</sup> It is, therefore, important to disprove these misconceptions to better understand the significance of their distinctive gender roles and functions within these societies.

Contrary to the feminists' claim, studies show that a *Ka Khadduh* or young daughter of the Khasi clan function only as a facilitator of religious rituals. She is guided by the counsel of her maternal uncle and brothers, and the task of sacrifice and other religious rites are performed

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149. Tiplut Nongbri, "Khasi Women and Matriliney: Transformations," *Gender Relations, Gender, Technology and Development*, 4, no. 3 (2017): 374–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09718524.2000.11909976>; "Women's Empowerment in Meghalaya," *Meghalaya Human Development Report*, 2008, 205, <https://megplanning.gov.in/MHDR/8.pdf>.

150. Sapphira Beth, "The Khasi Community Is Matrilineal, But Not Matriarchal," *Feminism in India*, March 15, 2018, <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/03/16/khasi-community-matrilineal-society/>; Patricia Mukhim, "'Matrilineal' Meghalaya Goes to Polls with Only 32 Women in Fray," *The Quint*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/opinion-meghalaya-assembly-elections-northeast-few-women-politicians-bjp-cong>.

by the maternal uncle or eldest son of the family.<sup>151</sup> The tribal women's traditional passive religious role resonates even within the church traditions and practices, and it is one factor contributing to their general aversion to the idea of women's ordination in the church. There are no women priests in traditional tribal society, though there was never any aspiration to become one in their history.<sup>152</sup> The cultural notion of these tribal men and women and their division of distinctive gender roles along with their structural functionalism is not subordinate nor hierarchical in nature; rather, the relationship between the two genders is complementary.

Modern feminists and progressive activists even from Meghalaya in line with Western ideals find problems with the traditional tribal roles within the community and church. Gertrude Lamare, a member of the progressive group Thma U Rangli-Juki, argues that the lack of women leadership in the Presbyterian Church in Khasi and Jaintia Hills is because majority of these women are satisfied with their roles and the current "patriarchal status quo."<sup>153</sup> Another problem we find here is the ignorance about the realities faced by common Meghalayan women. As Patricia Mukhim pointed out, most of the research and published articles on Meghalayan women are based on data drawn from and represented by a small group of educated, English-speaking progressive Meghalayan women who do not represent the realities of common women in

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151. Sarabha Kharbangar, *"A Study of Khasi Indigenous Religion: A Period of Transition (1897-1997)"* (Shillong, North-Eastern Hill University, 2006), 83–84; Kharlukhi, *"East-West Cultural Synthesis,"* 90; Gurdon P.R.T, *The Khasis* (New Delhi, India: Cosmo Publications, 1907), 88, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.42566/page/n5/mode/2up>.

152. Thomas, *"An Emerging Tribal Christian,"* 189.

153. Lamare, "Presbyterian Church Patriarchy » RAIOT."



Meghalaya.<sup>154</sup> Taking this into account, it is evident that there is an existing schism between the traditional and the modern outlook within these tribal groups. It is also worth pointing out that much of the Western ideology and feminist ethos are articulated only among the minor sectors within the 20.07% of urban population.<sup>155</sup> This also effectively silences and misrepresents the common people, particularly the extensive and major rural population.

### ***6. Westernized Urbanism Vs. Rural***

As a result of a geographical division between urban and rural areas, we find that majority of tribal residents in rural regions adhere to traditional norms. Meanwhile, a minority group in the urban areas embraces feminist ideals due to their wide exposure to Western ideals through mass media and modern missions. Although the Westernization of India's Northeastern provinces brought many changes, it also brought about new challenges and concerns. The establishment of colonial headquarters, administrative offices, and agro-industrial developments attracted a group of tribes to migrate to these locations in search of better economic conditions, eventually leading to sporadic distribution of urbanization in certain parts of the northeastern states.

According to statistics taken in 2011, there are 2,157,887 tribal Christians living in Meghalaya, of which 1,779,247 live in rural areas and only 378,640 reside in urban areas.<sup>156</sup>

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154. Mukhim, “*Matrilineal’ Meghalaya.*”

155 “Meghalaya Population 2021,” n.d., <https://www.indiacensus.net/states/meghalaya>.

156. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, “Census of India: ST-14 Scheduled Tribe Population by Religion Community: *Meghalaya*,” 2011, <https://censusindia.gov.in/2011census/SCST-Series/ST14.html>.

Despite the unequal distribution of population in the rural and urban areas, the majority of the region continues to demonstrate its traditional rural character in its lifestyle and practices. Even today, Meghalaya is predominantly rural in character, with a rural population that is 79.93% higher than the urban population.<sup>157</sup>

Meghalaya	Total Population	Total Rural Population	Total Urban Population
Schedule Caste Christians	2,157,887	1,779,247	378,640
Garos Christians	787,029	693,053	93,976
Khasi Christians	1,173,693	919,442	254,251

Figure 4.6 1: Scheduled Tribe Christian Population for Each Tribe in the State of Meghalaya - 2011<sup>158</sup>

Although economic and social advancement have been observed in some urbanized regions, most of the rural residents continue to adhere to a traditional, conservative social setting. This supports Mukhim’s statement that most data drawn for the feminist cause are from a small minority of so-called *modernists* who practice and promote progressive feminist ideals but fail to represent the reality of the common people in Meghalaya.

A typical village in the rural region can be used to illustrate the wide socio-cultural variance between the urban and rural concepts of gender norms and values. In the village of Dewleih, the role of women and the corresponding status they occupy in the social structure is

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157. Meghalaya Population 2021, <https://www.indiacensus.net/states/meghalaya>.

158. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, “Census of India.”

largely limited to the domestic sphere. Even in the religious institution of the village their role is restricted only as members of the congregation. The gender-based division of roles is evident in village life compared to urban regions. The structure of the family in the village demonstrates that authority within the family is male-centered. The role of women in the village is confined to the care and nurturing of children, cooking food, doing laundry, and other domestic chores.<sup>159</sup> Studies also show that it is among the urban population, as a result from their exposure to Western ideals and modernization, that many traditional and social-cultural practices have changed significantly. Specifically, they have experienced a transition to the modern concepts of the nuclear family, individual freedom, and women's empowerment through adaptation to new gender roles.<sup>160</sup>

Ehrenfel's study on the matrilineal family points out a clear distinction between the urban and rural populations that was visibly distinct even in the 1970s. He identified Westernization among five other trends that were responsible for the change in the traditional family system. According to him, Western ideology opposed the traditional form of the joint family along with traditional religion and its equalizing influence on individual behavioral patterns. As per Western standards, such retrograde practices are not ideal for individualistic freedom among tribes.<sup>161</sup>

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159. Jeffreyson Wahalng, "Social Status and Role of Women Among the Khasi Tribe of Meghalaya," 2015, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.1160.4564>.

160. Thai PBS, *Spirit of Asia: The Life of the Women in the Khasi Family*, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LxGuK\\_9qdds](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LxGuK_9qdds).

161. U. R. Von Ehrenfels, "Matrilineal Joint Family Patterns in India," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 2, no. 1 (1971): 55–57, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.2.1.54>.

An exposition by anthropologist Mithun Sikdhar on the matrilineal marriage system revealed that the changes in traditional norms and practices are often associated with factors such as urbanization, education, and industrialization. As per the study, women and men who are occupants in rural areas that engage in agriculture and wage-earning are more inclined towards keeping traditional norms. They represent the majority as compared to the urban population. As for those working in the urban areas, they belong to the transitional group and are more influenced by an urban lifestyle. The trend suggests that a transition from the traditional norms has occurred only among those in the urban areas. The Garo and Khasi societies were intensely democratic; they were classless and casteless, but today changes are evident among the urban populations. This change has led to a rise in individualistic values, emphasizing an individual's needs over group loyalties, and a decline of collective tribal values.<sup>162</sup>

### ***7. Tribal Christians in the Urban Regions and their Challenges***

Today, with economic growth and more opportunities, coupled with the transition of the tribe from traditional practices to modern Western culture, the modern Khasi and Garo Christians face new challenges. Anthropologists and researchers find a visible change in the tribal life in their dress styles and food habits. They attribute these changes to the western missionaries.<sup>163</sup>

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162. Mithun Sikdhar, "Continuity and Change in Matrilineal Marriage System: A Case Study among the Garos of Poschim Bosti, Assam," *Studies in Tribes and Tribals* 7 (June 5, 2009): 129–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0972639X.2009.11886603>; Bhattacharjee and Bhusan, *The Garos and the English, 1765-1874*, 10.

163 Sanjoy Hazarika, "In Hills of East India, A Christian Vision Survives," *The New York Times*, May 9, 1983, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/05/09/world/in-hills-of-east-india-a-christian-vision-survives.html>.

There is a cultural invasion that has been more visible among the Khasi and Garo youths, as ‘Westernized Christianity’ has overtaken their indigenous culture. Western culture has become a status symbol, a source of pride, and an icon of the new civilization. Contrary to the early Christian Khasis and Garos, the present-day tribal youth remain resistant to evangelical movements. One of the key problems identified is the liberal tendency and nominalism instilled by the American Baptist missionaries who came and worked with the Garos, affecting even the nature and content of their faith.<sup>164</sup>

One of the key problems raised by the modern urbanized Garo women is the passive role of women within the Garo church. The majority of these women claim that the church imposes and promotes discriminatory roles for women based on a patriarchal mentality and the man-dominated and clergy-centered practices inside the church.<sup>165</sup> On the same note, women from the Khasi Presbyterian Church have expressed their concern over the church’s disregard for the reformist principle and inclusion of women’s ordination.<sup>166</sup> It is worth noting that the critique by the urban tribal women on patriarchy within the church and family can be attributed to the influence of Western feminist thoughts and how they have shaped the modern tribal mind.

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164. Marak, *Christianity Among the Garos*, 180–81.

165. Thomas, “*An Emerging Tribal Christian*,” 152–60.

166. Lamare, “*Presbyterian Church Patriarchy: RAIOT*.”

## Conclusion

From the mid-eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, we see a wide range of socio-economic progressions in the West. The impact of Enlightenment theories promoted liberalism, progressivism, materialism, and idealism along with the expansion of industrialization and urbanization radically facilitated individual freedom. This progression positioned the West as an example of an ideal society globally. With this social and economic progression, colonialism took a new form under globalization. The term globalization as Anthony Giddens finds, is the world phenomenon of Western modernity that has extended to the rest of the world.<sup>167</sup> It thus has all the characteristics of cultural and economic imperialism, and one of its key oppositions is to the old traditional orders and values of the non-Western world. Conflict begins when the vision of order held by pre-modern or axial societies associated with Islam and similar groups is threatened by Western globalization and modernity. This is where religion plays or hinders an adaptive role in easing the conflict between the globalization of the dominant West over the non-Western world. As a result, we see the rise of religious fundamentalisms or extremes who openly reject globalization as well as the mediating role of religion towards globalization as religious movements carry social and other reform, and advancement of human rights in a language and culture that is embraced by its localization.<sup>168</sup>

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167. Darren Marks, *Shaping a Global Theological Mind*, 1st ed. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008), 2.

168. Marks, 2.

The Western mission and the role of women in missions as well as various theological discourses about gender roles reflect primarily the socio-economic and cultural struggles within the Western context. Western feminists and their various definitions of ideal womanhood, their opposition to gender-specific roles, and their reinterpretation of the Scripture in conformity to Western ideologies became problematic when they universalized their context to wider communities. In doing so, it hindered the progress of universal sisterhood therein. Given the trajectory of Western feminism and feminist Biblicists' socioeconomic, religious, and cultural developments, as well as their fallacies ingrained with racism and anti-Semitism, their portrayal of ideal womanhood as practical for any given society is also a problem identified here. The West's imposition of its ideal womanhood fails to appreciate the complex patterns of indigenous thoughts and values, as well as cultural and religious traditions followed by women in the Global South.

One of the key issues pointed out by feminists is gender inequality that is deeply ingrained in the structural functionalism of a society and seeks to root this out actively in whatever form it exists. Gender inequality or gender differences exist, and they are primarily attributable to various factors, including cultural, geographical, political, and religious or traditional practices. But, the idea that women, in general, belong to socially determined subordinate groups and there is thus a need for 'universal sisterhood' with goals and strategies that lead to ideal freedom becomes problematic when applied in societies like the Khasi and Garo. Besides this, gender oppression takes different forms in different societies and cultures, and what is considered oppression in one part of the world may be a voluntary act as part of a valued tradition in another. Therefore, the idea of universal sisterhood is unlike the universal opposition to gender-based oppression.

The concept of universal sisterhood and the idea of adopting Western cultural norms and practices as the only way to achieve an ideal gender-just society conflict with other cultures. It results in a regime of cultural dominance and worsen the lives of *other* women. In addition to this, Western feminists prescribe an ideal womanhood that is a sexually free and independent creature that is moored away from culture, tradition, and family life, and therefore it excludes all forms of traditional roles and associated values. It is also a fact that the Western enlightenment values and policies devalue cultural, communal, and familial associations, which are fundamental for women in the Khasi and Garo communities. The biased and discriminatory nature of the Western depiction of *other* women by placing them in a *patriarchal system of oppression* is also another concern here.

Another factor identified is the ingrained tendency of ethnocentrism within Western feminism, its intrinsic moral superiority over other cultures, and the imposition of a gender-just society based on the Western perspective of egalitarianism. The fact that late nineteenth-century feminist ideals and missions had a racial stance toward other cultures, beliefs, and practices is a significant issue identified in this study. The missionaries' imperialistic and superior attitude in their manner of conduct reveals their failure to value other cultures as well as their inability to adapt, which is a basic requirement of the Christian mission.

According to Article 2 of the UNESCO Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice, "any theory which claims that racial or ethnic groups are inherently superior or inferior, thus implying that some would be entitled to dominate or eliminate others, presumed to be inferior, or which bases value judgments on racial differentiation, has no scientific foundation and is contrary to the



moral and ethical principles of humanity.”<sup>169</sup> Article 3 states, “Any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, color, ethnic or national origin or religious intolerance motivated by racist considerations, which destroys or compromises the sovereign equality of States and the right of peoples to self-determination, or which limits ... the right of every human being and group to full development is incompatible ....”<sup>170</sup> As per these statements, devaluing the traditional roles of non-Western women, misrepresenting them, and the reinterpretation or misrepresentation of Jewish and Christian texts by a group of modern biblical scholars fall within the paradigm of racism as well as anti-Semitism.

The general tendency for a liberalizing trend towards gender egalitarianism in the Western world began in the 1960s.<sup>171</sup> Since the emergence of feminist movements in the West, the concept of gender egalitarianism has become a prominent criterion for gender justice. The Western egalitarian belief system endorses equal rights, equal roles, and the sharing of responsibilities between partners in breadwinning, and family caretaking duties, and domestic chores, thus it increases women’s opportunities to participate in political and economic activities. Furthermore, this concept is in opposition to any traditional gender specific roles, i.e., women

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169. UNESCO Organization, “*Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice*” (November 27, 1978), [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=13161&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13161&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).

170. UNESCO Organization.

171. Paula Thijs et al., “The Rise in Support for Gender Egalitarianism in the Netherlands, 1979-2006: The Roles of Educational Expansion, Secularization, and Female Labor Force Participation,” *Sex Roles* 81, no. 9 (November 1, 2019): 594, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-019-1015-z>; Shannon N. Davis and Theodore N. Greenstein, “Gender Ideology: Components, Predictors, and Consequences,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 35, no. 1 (August 1, 2009): 91, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-070308-115920>.

fulfil their role as homemakers in caretaking and parenting activities, while men are the breadwinner.<sup>172</sup> Any adaptation to the Western ‘egalitarian model’ of gender norms and functions will be problematic for the Khasi and Garo tribal communities, since most of the tribes that are in the rural areas are heavily dependent on traditional structural functionalism for their survival. At the same time the idea of gender eliminativism for gender equality and freedom is not an ideal gender norm for India’s Northeastern tribal context.

The Western concept of egalitarian liberalism, though it has political connotations, it misrepresents, devalues, and dehumanizes the majority of the world, including the tribal population. Unlike the Western concept of egalitarian gender roles, tribal egalitarianism is based on the concept of tribal identity rooted in the land, the egalitarian principle of a social system, and their sense of balance in the man-woman relationship as well as their respective rights.<sup>173</sup> The tribal egalitarianism closely resembles to headship complementarianism in which gender roles are differentiated between man and woman, who are equally involved at the same time, leading within two separate spheres with designated powers and functions in the social system. The traditional tribal family and society had a natural balance and equality between man and woman. Due to Western influence, today the distinction between gender roles is practically nonexistent among the urban tribal population.<sup>174</sup>

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172. Thijs et al., “The Rise in Support for Gender Egalitarianism in the Netherlands, 1979-2006,” 594.

173. R.S., *Voices from the Margin*, 118–19.

174. Thomas, “An Emerging Tribal Christian,” 156–58.

Using a clear scientific method, Heide Goettner-Abendroth, a German specialist in the study of matriarchy, defines matriarchy as a gender-egalitarian and consensus-based society. According to her research, matriarchal societies are true gender-egalitarian societies in which women are central figures, and the principle that governs here is the social functioning and freedom of both sexes. According to this cultural model, the role of women involves maternal values such as caretaking, nurturing, need-orientation, conflict resolution, negotiating with violence, and promoting peace.<sup>175</sup> Therefore, the cultural notions of the Khasi and Garo men and women and their division of distinctive gender roles along with their structural functionalism are not subordinative nor hierarchical in nature, but rather a complementary relationship between the two genders.

In addition, the concept of matriarchy is often a misnomer in the sense that it represents the mirror image of patriarchy where women rule as opposed to men. Hence, it has been misused and misrepresented as *rule by women* by various schools of thought and other political agents who are keen to promote the notion of women's empowerment. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, matriarchy was associated with the governance by women over family and the state.<sup>176</sup> Upon closer examination of Khasi and Garo tribal structural functionalism, it became apparent that women rarely dominate men, and it is contrary to the common perception that the matrilineal system provides a dominant position for women over men in terms of succession and inheritance.

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175. Göttner-Abendroth, "Re-Thinking 'Matriarchy' in Modern Matriarchal Studies Using Two Examples: The Khasi and the Mosuo," 5–6.

176. Roopleena Banerjee, "'Matriarchy' and Contemporary Khasi Society," *Indian History Congress*, Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 76 (2015): 918–19, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44156662>.

As far as Christian mission among the tribes is concerned, women's mission became an important tool for the reformation of these tribes. The early missionaries introduced new Christian ethos that eradicated the tribal cultural practices including headhunting, inter-tribal warfare, animal sacrifices, alcoholism, and slavery. The tribes' conversion to Christianity and reformation by means of educational infrastructures and developmental programs, initiated through the early missionaries, introduced the tribal communities to a civilized life. Female formal education taken up by the women missionaries was a significant contribution to the tribal reform.

But the later missions endowed with Western feminist ideals have had deeper impacts on certain groups of northeastern tribes. The changes in the tribes' traditional and religious values cannot be recognized as part of Christianization per se, as they are mostly due to the way the Christian mission was presented, shared, and practiced in the institutional Church among tribes. Influenced by modern liberal political ideologies, modern-day missionaries import their ideal Western culture into these communities. It is also evident here that due to globalization, Christian education and mass media, the Western social and cultural values have become status icons among the tribal youth in the urban regions. These adopted values defy the tribal communitarian values and traditions. The traditional aspects of communitarian tribal life have been replaced by individualism. The Khasi and Garo clan system among the urbanized population has replaced familialism with the Western concepts of individualism, and materialism. This has curtailed its function as a clan unified under economic, religious, and political factors and had an adverse effect on the young generation.

Studies on the influence of colonial power over converted tribal Christians, particularly among the urbanized population, show that the once-egalitarian agrarian tribal society has

transitioned to the Western model of monogamous nuclear families. The right to ownership of private property and individual houses and the practice of the European model of monogamous nuclear families segregated the once-established egalitarian agrarian Khasi society into classes of rich and poor. A one-family house and a nuclear family structure managed by men have destroyed the matrilineal clan structure and permitted the leeching away of women's rights.

Today, a substantial amount of modern literature has been published both in the Global North and Global South that presents modern feminist scholars' biased perspectives on the impact of Christianity on tribal women. The often one-sided, exploitative, and collaborative nature of this scholarship misrepresents the tribal women by embedding them in patriarchal cultures and subjecting them to 'double colonization.' They often describe the function of women in traditional families as dominated by 'patriarchalism.' This is one of the main reasons why the reality of the common tribal women and their voices have been either misrepresented, suppressed or ignored by these scholarships. As Jenkins pointed out, Western feminism has permeated even the feminist thoughts of the Global South, shaping the questions they ask and the methods they apply to reach a radical conclusion that is parallel to Western feminist thought.<sup>177</sup>

The question of whether published scholarship and books represent the common people or not, as Sugirtharajah and Jenkins noted earlier, holds true for hermeneutical trends in Northeast India. When theologians, as members of the educated tribal elite, speak for the uneducated, voiceless population, they often run the risk of totalizing and colonizing them. For instance, a group of faculties from the Eastern Theological College (an affiliate of the Baptist

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177. Jenkins, *The New Faces*, 164.

Serampore mission) identified patriarchy as the most significant barrier to Christian mission in Northeastern India. The major theme that stands out here is the close association of women's empowerment with women's ordination. Though women's ordination has been permitted since 1992, women rarely serve as pastors.<sup>178</sup> This demonstrates the Christian terrain of Northeast India, where Western ideas are well incorporated and accepted only among modern scholars and a minority of the urbanized Christian population.

The women missionaries involved in the late nineteenth century were, to a large extent, inspired by the Victorian notions of womanhood and domesticity, which center a woman's role within her home. This is one reason for the absence of conflict between the tribal conception of women's role and the Victorian notion during the early mission period. The early missionaries stressed only the Christian faith and morals and opposed only those practices such as polygamy, child marriage, headhunting, etc. Thomas asserts that the early converts to Christianity did not radically adapt to Western culture, but they retained their traditions that were not opposed to biblical principles; hence, the change is a recent phenomenon.<sup>179</sup>

As discussed earlier, the feminists' reinterpretation of the Jewish/Christian Scripture and traditions through their concepts of social and gender relations subsequently endorsed a culturally specific version of Christian values through modern missions, and this had a significant impact on the urban tribal population. However, for the majority of the tribes located in rural areas, the Bible continues to be the sole infallible source of authority for their tribal faith

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178. Daugherty and Athyal, *Understanding World Christianity*, 96–97.

179. Thomas, "An Emerging Tribal Christian," 149.

and practice. Biblical tribal values and ancient Israel's socio-cultural organization of an egalitarian community with gender-specific gender roles irrespective of economic class stratification can be equated to Northeastern tribal solidarity. This is a major reason why most of the tribal population in the rural areas remain conservative in their approach to the Bible, faith, and religious practices even today.

Feminism requires universalist opposition to sexist oppression, but the universal adoption of Western Enlightenment, liberal values and strategies that envisions a Western egalitarian gender-just society is problematic.<sup>180</sup> The core aspects of one's identity are often one's sense of community, heritage, family, inherent gender norms, and social values. These roles may or may not be perceived or seen as oppressive or restrictive by other cultures. Transforming them into an idealistic, Western egalitarian culture ends with adverse outcomes, as in the case of the Khasi and the Garos' future generations.

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180. Khader, *Decolonizing Universalism*, 27.

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