



Niam/Faith/Hynniewtrep: 7 Thoughts about 100 Unaddressed Picture Postcards from Khasi-Jaintia Hills, Northeast India

TARUN BHARTIYA

Niam/Faith/Hynniewtrep – 100 Unaddressed Picture Postcards from Khasi-Jaintia Hills is an ongoing photographic reflection on the ideas of faith, religion and conversion among the Khasi-Pnar community. Begun in 2006, the series engages with the question of colonial Christian missionary encounters in the Khasi-Jaintia hills and its changing meanings in the postcolonial Hinduised Indian state. The exhibition was supported by the Chennai Photo Biennial, Diffusion: Wales International Festival of Photography, and India Foundation for the Arts.

Keywords: Christianity, Hynniewtrep, India, Jaintia, Khasi, photography, Pnar

1.

Hynñiewtrep – Seven huts. Khasis, a matrilineal community in northeast India believe that they originated from the seven families who remained on earth when the tree connecting heaven and earth was cut down. Khasis call ~~their country~~ themselves Ki Hynñiewtrep.



2.

They had their own *Niam*, faith community, rooted in their land, clan and family.

3.

It is 22nd June, a recently sanctioned state holiday commemorating a long dead Welshman. On 22nd of June 1841 a Welsh miller's son arrives in Cherrapunjee. He writes home

“When you receive this you can venture to tell all our friends at home that we have arrived safely at Cherrapoonjee . . . My address will be Revd T.J. Missionary, Cherrapoonjee, Cassia Hills, Bengal’.”



POSTCARD

PLACE
STAMP
HERE

This you can venture to tell all our friends at home that we have arrived safely at Cherrapunjee ... My address will be Revd T.J. Missionary, Cherrapunjee, Cassia Hills, Bengal that when you receive

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4.

Thomas Jones would manage to baptize nobody. And translate only a part of the Gospel. They say he taught the locals how to brew alcohol, use a saw, purify lime. And then got involved in defending the Khasis from exploitation by the British East India company. Under pressure, Mission headquarters threw him out of the church and cancelled his missionary license. Attacked and chased by company soldiers out of the Khasi-Jaintia hills, Jones died a lonely death in Calcutta.

5.

The faith which TJ brought would sweep through these hills of North-eastern India, nativizing itself. But not without indigenous challenges and reworkings. There were many who chose the new book and there were those who kept their ancient faith alive.

6.

So how does one locate the signs and meanings of this transformative encounter between Gwalia and Khasia?

Through biographies?

A chronology of events?

Through resistance to the majoritarian impulses of the Indian Nation State?



7.

I am no ethnographer. No historian. Or, even a reporter of events. I peddle images.

8.

2006-07. Khasi-Jaintia hills were abuzz with the stories of revival amongst the adherents of Presbyterian Christianity.

Christian Revival, not to be confused with revivalism, in certain protestant denominations carries a spiritual meaning of working of the 'holy spirit' – if the faith community can get together, this mass working of the holy spirit can be apocalyptic.

For Khasi Presbyterians, revival of 1906 was a key event which showed the non-believers that the word of Christian god was real.

In 2006, 100 years after the first revival, signs and wonders of the holy spirit swept through these hills, especially amongst the presbyterian church. I started making images of this especially the children who seemed to be prophesying about heaven and earth. Deeply convinced of their relationship with god, these children were channelling the pain and tribulations of their community.



9.

I am a dkhar and may not even believe in gods and spirits.

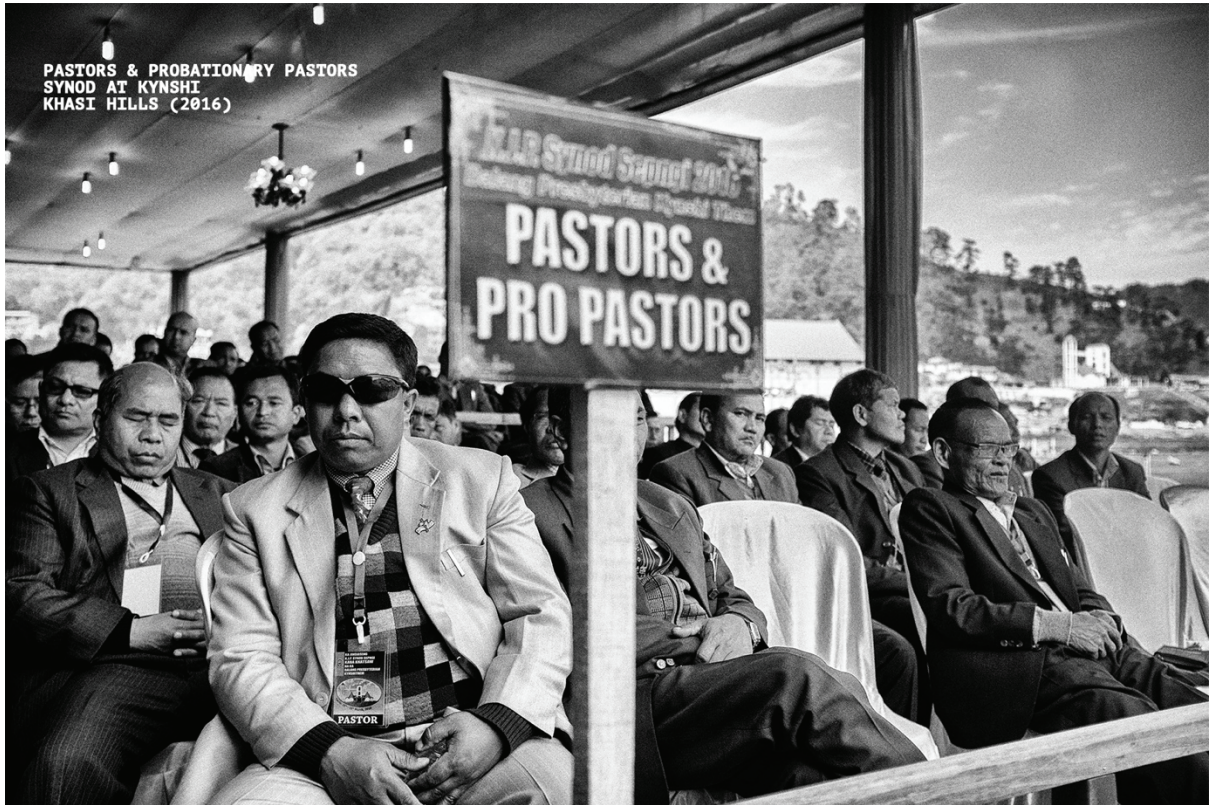
Me, an atheist could have dismissed this event as ‘delusion’ but I chose to believe in their belief. I was interested in why at that moment people were full of painful outpouring of their deepest anxieties and hopes.

So in that sense my initial curiosity was about the transcendence of belief itself which could make a person subject himself/herself to such a disruptive experience. It wouldn’t have been easy for the ‘revived’ to articulate this miraculous encounter with the numinous.



IO.

Slowly, I started thinking about the material manifestation of this faith through its history and cultural debates arrival of Christianity engendered in these hills. My own imagemaking all through these years has often not been a 'timebound' project with deadlines and definite sets of questions whose answers I want to illustrate. Somewhere along this journey with the changing public/political discourse in India with its politicisation/hinduisation of the question of faith and religion and National identity, my own 'private' curiosity about 'why' and 'how' of faith started changing. You can say History made its rude appearance.



11.

My children nominally baptized ask me why we gave them muslim sounding names.

If faith is the primary mode through which we make sense of our lives in relationship to the times, give answers to our deepest questions of meaning, then faith is not easily given up or followed. People arrive at a new faith because new faith may provide much more meaningful answer to their existential question. In the Hinduised notion of faith, identity and nation, conversion is seen as an encounter between ignorant people and powerful missionaries. In the Khasi hills, however, converting to Christianity was a difficult proposition. Converts risked breaking traditional kinship and family ties. But even when they converted, they did not automatically accept the western Christian worldview. They could challenge even the missionaries if they saw that the missionaries did not hold up to the Christian values. Khasis wanted to be Christians on their own terms.

U LUH, 31 MARCH 1871, LETTER TRANSLATED BY WILLIAM LEWIS
from WELSH MISSIONARIES AND BRITISH IMPERIALISM THE EMPIRE OF CLOUDS IN
NORTH-EAST INDIAN : ANDREW J. MAY (2012)



'Why should the sin of a Khassia be looked upon & condemned with a punishment', rebuked U Luh, 'while there is no power to condemn a Sahab whatever rules he breaks?'

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12.

For the hindu right who find Christian mission as something foreign and destructive for the local tribal culture are equally complicit in imposing foreign HINDU ideas over the local indigenous tradition. Many Khasi people challenged the patronising works of Christian missionaries and tried to hold on to their own ancient faith. And 20% of the Khasi people still follow their **Niam Tynrai/Traditional Faith**. But Niam Tynrai is not Hinduism.



13.

Ijoke. Christianity was a Khasi religion accidentally discovered in Wales.

FROM A POEM BY ALMOND SYIEM

POSTCARD

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HERE

**A paleface, god-sent young man
once entered the quietness of our
mist-woven hills, brought us letters,
literature and the Bible.
He was your countryman.
The Tommies, however, brought spite,
spattered our fathers' blood on the ferns
and spoke to us in gunfire tones.**

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13.

But being a Christian (or for that matter Muslim) in India these days is not a joke. India is being remade. Once celebrated as a great pluralist success of decolonized nation building, many of its post-colonial benchmarks like secularism and religious freedom are being quickly reworked, erased, made redundant in an authoritarian imagination of a monochromatic decolonized Hindu India. State after state legislates laws which criminalize 'foreign' faith.



14.
I make images and I am supposed to not consort with text.

From THE ANTI CONVERSION LAW LEGISLATED BY THE STATE GOVERNMENT OF
UTTAR PRADESH, INDIA

POSTCARD

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- a) "Allurement" means and includes offer of any temptation in the form of:
 - i) any gift, gratification, easy money or material benefit either in cash or kind;
 - ii) employment, free education in reputed school run by any religious body; or
 - (iii) better lifestyle, divine displeasure or otherwise;

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15.

I print UP's anti-conversion law at the back of some of the postcards. Apart from ridding people of agency criminalising conversion is the most fundamental way in which authoritarian regime can control its people. If conversion is a way through which people in their imagination can yearn towards a different life, then by putting a legal stop to that yearning is to condemn us to be imprisoned in our old pains doubts and statuses.

16.

Even the maps of constitutional republic called India fade in its Northeast highlands



17.

A place is neither beautiful or ugly. It can be less polluted or more, or have more rain than the some other place or even more cafes than the other. This touristy Indian emphasis on its frontier societies like Meghalaya is (bloody) patronising attempt to possess places, a societies and communities to sell an Edenic myth. Beauty in its touristy iteration is a form of denial and deception. Imagemaking in Meghalaya is predominantly a decorative art, a waterfall, a sunrise, well costumed salvaged cultural artifact.



18.

But there can be another way of looking at beauty, beauty as a way to ‘witness the splendor’ of world itself, subject the discordant to questions and doubts. Beauty as a process of finding meaning. ‘Staggering beauty of landscape’ at least for me is not a ‘distraction or blessing’ but an experience pregnant with historical, cultural and political realities which require interrogation of image-making (and that maybe ugly).

19.

What do you do with the images you have made? How do you make your private obsession ‘public’? In these times of looking over your shoulder before putting out your thoughts – I was lost. Through the private and political horrors of this pandemic, I started looking at my own work, thinking about the ways in which I could make them utter their truth. Chennai Photo Biennial and Diffusion- Welsh International Festival of Photography gave me a grant for an exhibition about ‘Imagining the Nation State’. This was my first ever application for a photography grant and I had beginners luck.



20.

I am usually terrified of galleries and archives, their sacred silences if you like. I wanted the images and the arguments that they carried to be more ephemeral, cheap and democratic. In the Welsh Calvinist Methodist Archives lodged at the Nation Library at Wales, Aberystwyth, I had come across picture postcards which the Welsh missionaries had made about their work in Khasi Hills and that got me thinking. The postcard was a cheap and convenient means of emblematising a place bringing together the public and the private, the distant and the near, the expensively exotic and the cheaply reproducible. They were like citations from the past, a repository of practical memory.



FROM KA JINGSNENG TYMMEN - U RADHON SINGH BERRY KHARWANLANG (1982)

(Katto shuwa)
POSTCARD
A ! Jingsneng Akor Khasi,
Hangno pha don mynta sha,
Ha dohnud ki khun ka Ri,
Ne ym don ba pdiang Ia pha?

PLACE
STAMP
HERE



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21.

But, in our times when mobile photographic snapshot has become a way of forgetting a place, picture postcards will carry 'artistic value' and worth possessing. And that's where the idea of gashing it with textual intervention came about. Make them dirty, if you like with politics, history and discomfort. Postcards which will remain unsent publicly like samizdat. A friend, seeing the postcards quoted Dylan to me:

*"They're selling postcards of the hanging
They're painting the passports brown
The beauty parlor is filled with sailors
The circus is in town."*

FROM KA JINGSENG TYMMEN - U RADHON SINGH BERRY KHARWANLANG (1982)
TRANSLATED BY KONG BIJOYA SAMZAN

POSTCARD CONCLUSION

O! Wondrous Khasi Culture,
Where are you now?
In the peoples' hearts and souls,
Or where you are listened to no more?

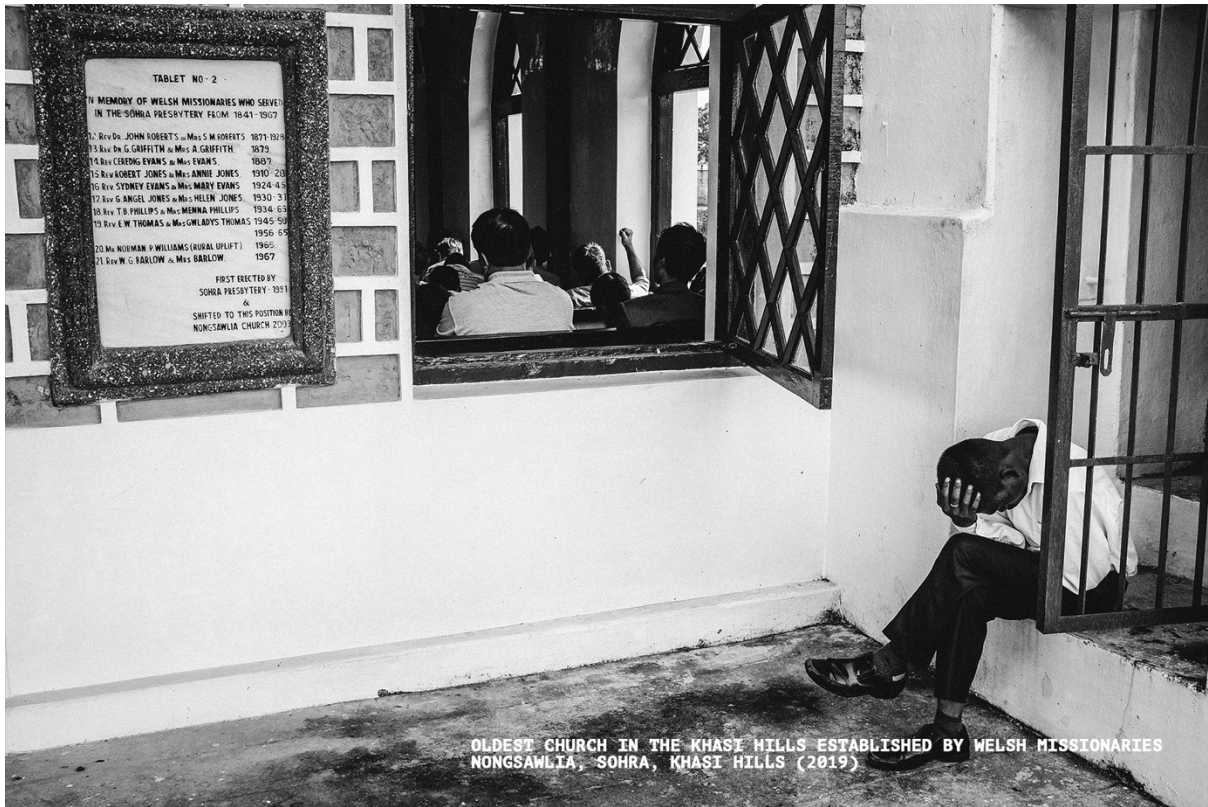


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22.

I wanted to do 180 postcards, memorialising each year since Thomas Jones, the Welsh Calvinist Methodist missionary arrived in the Khasi Hills, but I lost nerve and stopped at 100. **Niam/Faith/Hynñiewtrep.** 100 picture post cards. 100 memories. 100 ephemeral ways of thinking about faith, colonialism and history.



Postscript

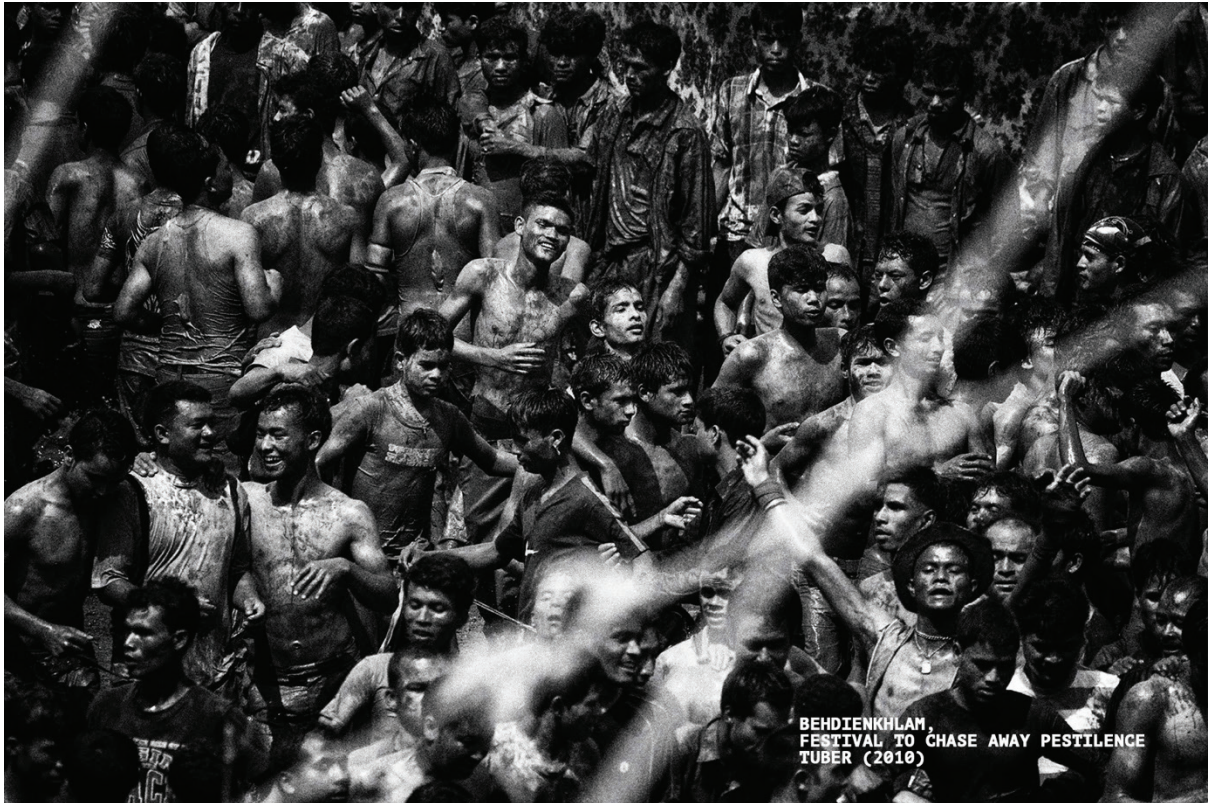
And the picture postcards started circulating in Portable Document Format. Indians who describe themselves as Liberals noticed the critique of incipient religious authoritarianism seeping across the images. A sort of an oppositional text ready to stand to the majoritarian impulse of Hindu India. And then I get a message.

[14:13, 11/6/2021] Thanks for sharing Bah.

Being from Niam Tynrai, these images bring mixed feelings, of past fears, hate, sadness. The pressure to convert to 'lah long niam' has always been there and persists till now. For a long time, as a child, I always felt like I didn't belong, wasn't accepted and that I was wrong for not being a Christian. These images hold a meaning of constant struggle for me. Now I'm getting stronger in my faith and hence myself and what I believe.

*[14:14, 11/6/2021] Made to feel like I was wrong**





POSTCARD

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Tarun Bhartiya
2021

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-DIFFUSION WALES AND CERNAT PHOTO BIENNIAL INDIA 2021

UNADDRESSED POSTCARDS

FROM

KHASI - JAINTIA HILLS

2021

Tarun Bhartiya is a documentary imagemaker, Hindi poet, and political activist based in Shillong. He is a founder member of Raiot Collective.