

Liberal Religious Movements and Christian / Unitarian Missions in India in the 19th and 20th Centuries

18th Century was a dark period of religious disenlightenment in India. Tensions between Muslims and Hindus grew. By 1800, a “Bengal renaissance” was emerging due in part to English and Western education taking hold.

19th Century American and British Unitarians generally favored mission work in some developing nations, although not completely without mixed feelings.

20th Century American Unitarians have had little understanding or sympathy for Christian missions, in general. Likewise, there has been much resistance to Christian missions in India due to prevailing Hindu nationalist sentiment that continues into the 21st Century.

Indian Unitarianism in 20th Century grew from various and diverse traditions with origins in Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Tibetan Buddhism, American and English Unitarianism, American transcendentalist influences, plus panentheistic and animistic local traditions.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy (Rammohun Roy): Born of Brahmin class in 1772 Calcutta and died at age 61 in England, 1833. A Hindu reformer, he was later dubbed “*Father of Modern India*”. His originality was, however, influenced by English and American Unitarians and transcendentalists. His ideas and attitudes were first shaped by his encounters with Christian missionaries in Calcutta. He was at the core of a small group that developed the liberal **Brahmo Samaj** movement in Calcutta. Writings of Wm. Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker were influential in the early evolution of Brahmo Samaj. By raising religious and social and political questions on issues such as *sati* (widow burning), infanticide and other disagreeable caste practices, Rammohun did not ingratiate himself to orthodox elements of Hindu society. His writings were discovered by English Unitarians in 1818 and by American Unitarians in 1821. His most popular tome, if not the coolest title, was *The Precepts of Jesus - Guide to Peace and Happiness*, 1820.

Brahmo Samaj (Society of Vedantists) – In the 1840’s after Rammohun’s death, both Hindu orthodox culture and Brahmo Samaj opposition to Christian missionaries combined with lack of support for an American based Unitarian Mission in India. Slow growth ensued for all missions until the climate warmed in

mid-1850's. In 1843, Rammohum's successor Debendranath Tagore framed a covenant making the Brahmo Samaj a new sect of Hinduism. God is a personal being with sublime attributes.

1. God has never become incarnate.
2. God hears and answers prayers.
3. God is to be worshipped only in spiritual ways. Hindu asceticism, temples and fixed forms of worship are unnecessary... all castes and races may worship God acceptably.
4. Repentance and cessation from sin are the only ways to forgiveness and salvation.
5. Nature and intuition are sources for the knowledge of God. No book is.

D. Tagore carried on Brahmo Samaj as a conservative to liberal reform movement with a strong social service dimension. By the 1880's, Brahmo Samaj had established a mission in the Khasi Hills. In both Madras and Khasi Hills, Unitarians existed alongside Brahmos in the indigenous populations, but in both cases Unitarians were represented among the low-caste and tribal peoples while Brahmos were almost entirely reform-oriented Hindus of largely Brahmin background.

1816 William Roberts – The first Indian identifying himself as a Unitarian Christian was a low-caste Tamil Hindu, Moodelliar Vellazha, born in 1770, who called himself by the Christian name William Roberts. In 1816, he initiated an extensive correspondence with London Unitarian Reverend Thomas Belsham and told his story of “conversion” to Unitariansim. Roberts continued to serve Indian Unitarians until his death in 1839 after years of service to the Madras mission.

1818 William Adam – Born in Scotland circa 1795. Ordained a Baptist and sent to its *Baptist Missionary Society* Madras mission in 1818. Adam accepted a request from Rammohun Roy to help translate the New Testament into Bengali. Through many discussions with Rammohun, Adam “converted” to Arianism and thus, Unitarianism. After much correspondence and editorial writing, Adam was subjected to a scandalous heresy trial and excommunicated from the Baptist church in Scotland. He was dubbed “*the Second Fallen Adam*” by Scottish and English Baptists. Adam remained in India as Unitarian missionary (supported by Boston-based *Society for the Promotion of Christianity in India* until 1829. Adam

continued with greater income as journalist and Bengal government servant until 1838. Having sent his family ahead to America in 1834, Adam now felt he had sufficient funds to leave India and joined them in Boston in November 1838. In Boston, he addressed the *Society for the Promotion of Christianity in India*. Adam's address in addition to William Roberts' death in 1839 combined to discourage the *Society* from continuing support of the Madras mission. On June 5, 1839, the *Society* voted to disband and turned over its funds to various domestic Unitarian organizations. In America, Adam became a vocal abolitionist, advocating for slaves' rights both in America and those in India subservient to British East India Company. He served as Unitarian minister in Toronto and at Chicago First Unitarian in 1849. By 1861, Adam had become sharply disillusioned, he repudiated American Unitarianism, no longer considered himself a minister and returned to England.

1854 Charles Timothy Brooks – Born in Salem, MA 1813. Graduated Harvard College and Harvard Divinity in 1835. Brooks served his entire 37-year pastorate at Newport, RI and suffered from various bronchial ailments in the cold, damp climate. By chance, an acquaintance offered Brooks a free trip to India on a new ship, the "Piscataqua". In 1854, some twenty-five years after the demise of the first Unitarian mission in India (Adam in 1829), the Reverend Brooks visited Madras and Calcutta to represent the interests of the American Unitarian Association. British rule had consolidated its hold on Bengal as well as much of the rest of the sub-continent. Brooks spent less than a year in India but did meet William Roberts and other Brahmo Samaj and Unitarians and was very impressed. He returned to Boston and persuaded the American Unitarian Association Executive Committee to revive its mission in India. One year later, 39 year old Reverend Charles Dall arrived in Calcutta. Brooks was a prolific author of poems and hymns.

1855 Charles Dall – Born in Baltimore 1816 but educated in Boston where he lived with an uncle. Graduated valedictorian from Boston Latin School in 1833. Dall entered Harvard College where he appeared to be a sensitive, studious young man who, according to his biographer, suffered "peculiarities of manner and temperament" which seemed to alienate many of his classmates. Dall entered Harvard Divinity School and graduated and was ordained in 1840. Dall's first pastorate was in St. Louis and was followed restlessly by pastorates in Baltimore,

MD, Portsmouth, NH, Needham, MA and Toronto. Upon falling ill in 1854, Dall returned for recovery to Newton, MA. Upon recovery in 1855, Dall accepted the charge from American Unitarian Association to fill the Calcutta mission and continued the ministry there for thirty-one years. Although Dall never traveled to Khasi Hills, his lasting Unitarian legacy was not in Calcutta, but in the Khasi Hills.

1883 Moncure Daniel Conway – Conway deserves attention in this study because he bridges the gap between those English and American Unitarians interested in Eastern religions and philosophy for its own sake and those who went out as missionaries. Born a Methodist in conservative Virginia 1832, Conway attended Harvard Divinity School in 1853 against the wishes of his family. Newly ordained in 1857 and called to a Unitarian pulpit in Washington, D.C., he was quickly fired due to his radical abolitionist views. Conway wrote and was published avidly in England where he served Unitarianism during the Civil War. A trip to Australia in 1883 included Conway's only journey to India. This visit was covered in some detail in his book *My Pilgrimage to the Wise Men of the East*. In his later years Conway gradually moved away from Unitarianism, further to the left. During the years before his death in 1907, Conway joined a *Congress of Free-thinkers* and worked in pacifist causes while devoting most of his last decade of life to writing and travel.

1888 Hajom Kissor Singh – (1865-1923) Khasi culture had been greatly converted to Christianity by Welsh Calvinist Methodist - Presbyterian and other Christian denominations by 1880. The tribe had emigrated from Cambodia via Burma possibly hundreds of years earlier. Historically, Khasi culture was not Hindu but rather panentheistic*, based on tribal shamanistic practices. Hajom Kissor Singh had been converted to Christianity at a young age in his home town of Jowal. Before the missionary encounters, the Khasi language had not been written; hence when the Welsh began to translate the Bible into Khasi, they rendered the language into Roman script. While Singh considered himself to be a good Christian, he had found himself questioning many doctrines. The Welsh told Singh that his ideas sounded much like the blasphemous English Unitarians and he responded, "I want to meet these Unitarians". By 1887, the Brahmo Samaj had developed an active mission in the Khasi Hills. In 1888, H.K. Singh announced their own *Unitarian Statement of Belief: We believe 1) in the Unity of God; 2) in the*

Fatherhood and Motherhood of God; 3) in the Brotherhood of Man; 4) in Love, Union, Worship and Faith; and 5) in Immortality."

The Khasi Unitarian movement at its inception was developed in an indigenous style not dominated by American or English Unitarian missionary presence.

**Panentheism:* A doctrine that the Universe subsists within God, but that God nevertheless transcends or has some existence separate from the universe. For clarity, *pantheism* is a belief the Universe is in some sense divine and should be revered. Pantheism identifies the universe with God but denies any personality or transcendence of such a God.

1895 Jabez T. Sunderland – Born Yorkshire, England 1842, immigrated to US at an early age and died in Ann Arbor, MI in 1936 at age 94. Sunderland was educated at the old University of Chicago in 1867-69 and received his B.D. degree from the Baptist Theological Union 1870. A Baptist convert like William Adam, Sunderland converted to Unitarianism within three years of his first Baptist church ordination in MA. Before Sunderland first traveled to India in 1895 at age 53, he had become well-versed and educated in Brahmo Samaj movement and Indian Unitarianism. At age 22 in 1887, Khasi Hajom Kissor Singh initiated letters to Sunderland about his encounters with Unitarianism and Wm. Ellery Channing's works. Sunderland visited the Khasi Hills and H.K. Singh in 1896. The route was so steep and rugged for Sunderland that he was sometimes carried over cliffs in a basket (*knoop*) upon the backs of porters. The two corresponded for 48 years in all.

1918 John Haynes Holmes – (1879-1964) Holmes' family was Unitarian and close to Theodore Parker. Holmes graduated Harvard College and Harvard Divinity School in 1904. His first pastorate was at Dorchester, MA but found more substance in social activism. At the AUA meetings in 1908, Holmes banded with other young radicals to found the Unitarian Fellowship for Social Justice (UFSJ), and was its president, 1908-11. In 1909 Holmes was among the founders of the NAACP, a founder and later chair of the ACLU. He was also very active in war resistance movements before WW-I. In 1918, the AUA Board moved to deny financial aid to any church whose minister "is not a willing, earnest, and outspoken supporter of the United States in a vigorous and resolute prosecution of the war." Later that year Holmes offered to resign his ministerial fellowship with the Association, but it was not accepted. He preached anti-war messages around the country and repeatedly from his own pulpit. Secret Service men were

in regular attendance at his services. On at least one occasion, Holmes's words were used as German war propaganda.

Holmes had 'discovered' Mohandas Gandhi in 1918. In 1921 he declared him in a sermon "The Greatest Man in the World," a "savior" who provided a vision of what religion could be in the contemporary world. Thereafter, Holmes tirelessly promoted Gandhi's spirit of active nonviolence and Indian nationalism. Holmes founded the *India League of America*. Holmes first met Gandhi in 1931 in London and again while touring India for a three month lecture tour in New Delhi in October 1947 amidst great political turmoil and martial law. Gandhi was assassinated in January 1948.

Holmes was a prolific author of hymns. John Haynes Holmes' legacy lives today in the UUA STLT Hymnal "the gray one", # 82 "*The Land of Bursting Sunrise*".

1934 Annie Margaret Barr – (1899-1973) Annie Margaret Barr was a British Unitarian minister who dedicated her life to the Khasi people. She lived in the Khasi Hills of Assam-Meghalaya for almost 40 years since she first visited in 1934. A.M. Barr is honored with the Khasi title of respect 'Kong Barr'. In Kharang, Mawrsynjri, the village in which the Children's Village is built, and in the capital city of Shillong, Reverend Barr has a number of facilities named after her. In addition to helping the Khasi community spiritually and medically, Reverend Barr personally operated an orphanage until her death in 1973. Because of her work with Khasi children and how fondly she is remembered by the entire community, it was thought appropriate to give her name to Children's Village in Mawrsynjri, near Kharang, Meghalaya. Kong Barr's remains are interred in Mawrsynjri at the Kong Barr Memorial Hospital, built in 1976.

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This document compiled by Richard Grayson, November 2019.



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