

On September 18, 1887, the first Unitarian worship service was held in the Khasi Hills of India. It started with just four people at a single church. Yet with love, care, nurture, service, commitment...and I'll add grit, elbow grease and determination (those actions are rarely mentioned in the history books yet they most always are there), the Khasi Hills Unitarians now number 10,000 individuals and over 30 churches. Our partner church in Mawsynjri is one of them; and this date, September 18, is still celebrated by Khasi Unitarians.

This first worship service and this movement, in the hilly northeastern state of Meghalaya, the abode of the clouds, began at the home the visionary 22-year-old Hajom Kissor Singh.

The Indian state of Meghalaya, where the Khasi Hills are located, is one of seven states situated in a peninsula of land in northeast India. These seven states are surrounded by Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal and China. Culturally speaking, Meghalaya, and these six other states, are closer to southeast Asia than to India itself. Hindus are a religious minority in Meghalaya with only 11% of its citizens practicing this faith. Approximately 75% of Meghalayans are Christian.

Christianity arrived with British rule in the 19th century; yet this didn't displace Hinduism in this region. It displaced a native shamanistic religion consisting of creator gods, demons, ghosts and apparitions.

Hajom Kissor Singh, born in 1865 at Cherrapunjee, Meghalaya, a remote, agrarian region, arguably the wettest place on earth with over 470 inches of rain each year. He was predisposed toward religion and spirituality; and it was this predisposition, this thirst, combined with a confluence of events and history, which led him to the development of his own faith which, unknown to him and by coincidence really, happened to be predominantly Unitarian.

He was born into the era of the Brahmo Samaj in India; which could be described as a monotheistic reformation of Hinduism. It was an intellectual, reason and intuition based reformation, practiced mostly amongst the elite classes that, among other things, dispelled reliance on the Vedas (i.e. scriptural authority), did away with concepts of rebirth and death (i.e. samsara) and disposed of belief in avatars (i.e. belief in multiple manifestations of gods in the way that in Hinduism Krishna, Rama, Buddha are considered to be avatars of Vishnu, one of the three principal deities in Hinduism.) There was also a societal reformation component to the Brahmo Samaj. They sought to do away with the caste system, grant more rights to women and introduce educational reforms.

Amongst the swarm of Christian missionaries that spread throughout India as a result of western imperialism was the Unitarian minister Rev. Charles Dall. Rev. Dall was born in

Baltimore and in 1816, and after serving as a minister in the U. S. and Canada for a decade was appointed in 1855 by the American Unitarian Association as its sole missionary to India based in Calcutta. In 1855, leaving his wife and two young children back in Boston, Rev. Dall left for Calcutta and essentially spent the final 30 years of his life there.

One might think that this, with him essentially abandoning his family, was a terrible thing to do, but from what I've read about Rev. Charles Dall, his wife may have actually been relieved. He is almost universally described as having a difficult personality (and although I could be wrong, something tells me that in this description, the historians are going easy on him). His wife, Caroline Healy Dall was the daughter of a multi-millionaire and she became a prominent author and journalist in her own right. Unitarian writer and historian Spencer Lavan wrote that, "Their marriage was not a success. Charles was unhealthy, unstable, and unsuccessful in his early ministries.... [His] ministry [in the United States] ended in professional and physical disaster....Caroline soon treated him as a sick child (Spencer Lavan, Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography)."

Depending upon how you look at it, Rev. Dall's ministry in India might also be called a failure. Technically speaking, he may have actually converted no one to Christianity or to even Unitarianism.

Upon arriving in Calcutta, and seeing the reason and intuition based Brahmo Samaj movement, a movement or approach to religion similar to 19th century Unitarianism, he saw an opportunity for conversion. He became well acquainted with the leaders of this movement, yet he was a sole missionary and likely up against religious, societal and cultural forces far beyond his control. His personality likely got in the way as well. Brahmo leader, Keshub Chunder Sen, obviously frustrated with Rev Dall said, "[Unitarianism's] representative in Calcutta has made it ridiculous here (Spencer Lavan, Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography)."

While Rev. Dall was doing missionary work in Calcutta, Welsh Christian missionaries established themselves in Cherrapunjee, Meghalaya. They preached a Calvinist doctrine of the innate depravity of human nature, predestination and eternal hellfire and damnation...and in the love of Jesus.

....and they converted a young Hajom Kissor Singh.

The life and teachings of Jesus, as set forth in the New Testament Gospels spoke him. He didn't really take notice when the Welsh missionaries criticized and condemned the native shamanistic religion of the region. That religion and its practices hadn't spoken to him in the first place. Yet he became suspicious however when the Welsh missionaries began to

condemn any form of Christianity that didn't perfectly align with their own. Didn't these other Christians also revere Jesus' New Testament teachings?

The young Hajom Kissor Singh came to the realization that, in his opinion, the Welsh missionaries had merely replaced the native shamanistic belief in demons with a belief in everlasting hellfire.

He began to question. Might other aspects of Christian theology, taught to him by the Welsh missionaries, be contrived replacements inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus?

He turned away from the theology taught him and began to develop his own. Annie Margaret Barr, a British Unitarian minister who never knew H. K. Singh personally, and who, among many other things, ran an orphanage in the Khasi Hills for decades wrote that Hajom Kissor Singh "felt and declared that the message of election, damnation, and salvation—by going to a certain church and profession of a certain creed—was incompatible with the teachings of Jesus as he read for himself in the Gospels . . . He tried to persuade his fellow Christians that the essence of Christianity was to be found in Christ's way of life and scale of values and not in any scheme of salvation by blood or faith....(Spencer Lavan, Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography)." He also believed that the teachings of Jesus compelled one to be involved in societal reforms.

This developing theology could have been articulated by most any Unitarian minister or theologian of the 19th century yet Hajom Kissor Singh had never even heard of Unitarianism. He began to develop this theology completely on his own.

It wasn't until he had a theological discussion with a member of the Brahma Samaj that he was told that his developing theology had much in common with the theology of a Unitarian in Calcutta named Charles Dall.

With the Khasi Hills being about 600 miles from Calcutta, Hajom Kissor Singh and Rev. Charles Dall began a written correspondence; with Rev. Dall regularly sending him the writings and sermons of William Ellery Channing and other prominent Unitarians.

By the time of their first Unitarian service in September 1887, the Khasi Unitarians had developed a statement of faith which consisted of belief (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.

This belief in immortality however is not a westernized addition yet rather something influenced by native Khasi religion. Interestingly, this applies to everybody; it is universalist yet he likely knew nothing about Universalism at the time. He believed that upon one's

death, one's spirit returns to the Kingdom of the Spirit. It's not a good or bad, heaven or hell. I don't fully know; perhaps simply a neutral, other place.

Hajom Kissor Singh was not a minister - he made his living in real estate, surveying, banking, working in a government office, and even dealing in medicine – yet he consistently, and almost singlehandedly, and single-mindedly leveraged his many talents toward the promotion of Unitarian churches throughout the Khasi Hills. He did this, for a while at least as a single parent, his first wife and many of their children died and he raised a son and three daughters on his own.

With time and effort, the Unitarian movement in the Khasi Hills began to grow. In 1896 Unitarian minister Jabez Sunderland traveled there to meet Hajom Kissor Singh and to witness the movement firsthand, he wrote

I have never been more impressed with any religious movement than this in the Khasi Hills. Everywhere I saw evidences, sincerity, consecration and warm attachment to the religious faith which the people had felt had done so much for them. The whole movement is unique in the fact that it has sprung from the soil. (Spencer Lavan, Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography)

Although he did compose many hymns of the Khasi hymnbook; hymns that are still sung today, there are no copies of any sermons, essays, religious or theological writings authored by Hajom Kissor Singh. There is a diary however.

His diary for 1886 shows many entries

“but then, suddenly, there is a page with a border of black ink and the heading, “The Death of Rev. C. H. A. Dall.” I am very grieved to write here as a permanent record of the death of Rev. Dall my dear teacher, benefactor and helper . . . For nearly a year now I have been writing to C. H. A. Dall and I confess that I have got great light from him . . . I hope to further the cause of . . . Unitarianism in the Khasi Hills but now that my helper has died it will be very difficult to do this alone . . .(Bruce Findlow, *Kharang*, p54).

Rev. Charles Dall, a difficult personality, “...unstable, and unsuccessful in his early ministries.... [His] ministry [in the United States] ended in professional and physical disaster....[Unitarianism's] representative in Calcutta...[who had] made it ridiculous [there] (Spencer Lavan, Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography)” – a missionary who likely converted no one to Christianity or to Unitarianism; yet a missionary who took the time, a missionary who found a way to make a difference in one man who had discovered Unitarianism on his own. And this one man, Hajom Kissor Singh, starting in his home with

The Birth of the Khasi Unitarians
Rev. Dave Dunn

September 15, 2019
UU Metro Atlanta North

three others created a movement that has been meaningful, and perhaps even life-saving to tens of thousands since September 18, 1887.

To Nangroi...Progress Onward