



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach in Northeast India

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Overview

With a combined population of approximately 46 million, northeast India comprises the eight administrative states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. Although several administrative states in Northeast India have a Christian majority or large Christian minority and greater religious freedom than other regions of India, the Church has never extended missionary activity into this region. This case study reviews the history of the Church administering northeast India and provides recommendations for how to effectively establish an LDS presence into this region. Challenges for initiating an LDS presence in northeast India are identified. The growth of the Church in other regions of India is summarized and the size and growth of other proselytizing Christian groups in northeast India is provided. Limitations to this case study are identified and prospects for future growth are predicted.

Northeast India - Background

For millennia, northeast India has played an important role in trade and as a land bridge for interethnic relations between the various states and kingdoms in the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and Tibet. Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic peoples settled the region and most indigenous ethnic groups pertain to these two language families. Rugged terrain in some areas and the confluence of differing peoples and cultures between India, Burma, and China have produced a high degree of ethnolinguistic diversity in the region. Today major ethnolinguistic groups in the region include the Assamese, Bodo, Chin, Garo, Karbi, Khasi, Meitei, Mising (Miri), Mizo, Naga, Nepali, and Sylheti. Many of these ethnolinguistic groups do not comprise a clear, homogenous people that speak the same language but rather these peoples constitute a loose collection of similar ethnolinguistic groups that speak distinctly different languages. For example, there are approximately 35 subgroups of the Naga that reside in northeastern India.^[1]

Several different kingdoms and states once existed in northeast India before the region was absorbed into Burma in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The United Kingdom controlled most areas of northeast India during the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century. In 1947, the region fell under the sovereignty of India upon independence from the United Kingdom. Separatist movements occurred in several areas of northeast India during the latter-half of the twentieth century such as in Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland as indigenous peoples sought for independence from India or greater autonomy from the national or provincial government. Today many of the indigenous peoples of northeast India reside in rural areas and continue to rely on agriculture for employment.

Northeast India exhibits the greatest religious pluralism of the regions of India and contains the only Christian-majority provinces in India. The 2001 Indian census reported that Christians constituted 90% of the population in Nagaland, 87% in Mizoram, 70% in Meghalaya, 34% in Manipur, 19% in Arunachal Pradesh, 7% in Sikkim, 4% in Assam, and 3% in Tripura whereas Hindus comprised 86% of the population in Tripura, 65% in Assam, 61% in Sikkim, 46% in Manipur, 35% in Arunachal Pradesh, 13% in Meghalaya, 8% in Nagaland, and 4% in Mizoram.^[2] Muslims and Buddhist also comprise significant percentages of the population in several northeast Indian provinces. For example, Muslims comprise 31% of the population in Assam and Buddhists comprise 28% of the population of Sikkim and 13% of the population in Arunachal Pradesh.

LDS Background

There has never been a known LDS presence in northeast India. The India Bangalore Mission included northeast India within

its mission boundaries until 2007 when the region was transferred to the India New Delhi Mission. The India New Delhi Mission Branch currently includes northeast India within its boundaries. Member groups have never appeared to operate in the region.

Recommendations

The assignment of a senior missionary couple and two or three young full-time missionary companionships to a major city in northeast India offers one of the most proactive and effective methods that the Church can establish an initial presence. Mission and area leaders can investigate conditions and determine which major city would be most favorable to assign missionaries to the region for the first time. Factors that would likely play into effect include the accessibility of the city by airplane and train from New Delhi, the status of religious freedom, the number of isolated members in the city, the size of the city population, and the quality of living conditions and safety. Cities that may be best suited for the initial assignment of full-time missionaries include Aizawl, Mizoram; Guwahati, Assam; Imphal, Manipur; Kohima, Nagaland; and Sillong, Meghalaya. The establishment of the Church in northeast India will heavily depend on the assignment of full-time missionaries as there is likely no membership or leadership base from which mission leaders can organize member groups or branches. Carefully preparing investigators for baptism and long-term church service will be required to reduce dependency on full-time missionaries for basic church administration and increase the local self-sufficiency of the Church. A mixture of native Indian and white North American missionaries may be the most effective approach for initiating outreach due to past successes of white European and American Protestant missionaries proselytizing native peoples. Humanitarian and development work carried out by senior missionaries has potential for the Church to establish positive relations with government and community leaders and to survey opportunities for initiating formal missionary activity.

Indigenous populations in northeast India have exhibited some of the highest receptivity to Christian proselytism and pose unequalled opportunities for proselytism in the region. LDS teaching approaches have been tailored to those with a Christian background suggesting good applicability of LDS teaching methods and missionary lessons to the native populations. Christians tend to be more tolerant of missionary activity and proselytism than Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists. Religious pluralism among Christians in many areas suggests that the Church may experience less opposition from other religious groups than in other areas of India.

Challenges

The extremely small size of the LDS Church in relation to the enormous population of India stands as one of the greatest barriers to opening northeast India to LDS missionary activity. There over 40 cities in India with one million or more inhabitants without an LDS branch operating; only one of which is located in northeast India (Guwahati). Many of these cities appear to have a handful of Latter-day Saints and would likely be of greater priority to open for mission leaders than cities in northeast India where there do not appear to be any members and where there is only one city with one million or more inhabitants. Mission leaders have channeled limited mission resources to the most populous cities where there is an LDS presence. Church leaders have focused on establishing centers of strength in these cities and preparing districts to become stakes as only one stake operates in the entire country. Virtually all major cities with an LDS presence have vast areas untouched by proselytism efforts as only half a dozen or less congregations service some cities with populations exceeding five million. Due to efforts to strengthen the Church in cities where congregations operate and to establish additional stakes, the Church has not established a ward or branch in any additional cities in India since the mid-2000s. This trend poses a serious challenge for contemplating any serious efforts to open missionary activity in northeast India.

Northeast India is isolated from cities with an official LDS presence creating challenges for church and mission administration. The Church has only two branches that operate near northeast India in Kolkata and Dhaka, Bangladesh and neither location has ever had proselytizing missionaries assigned. Prospective full-time missionaries assigned to northeast India would be separated from mission leadership by hundreds of kilometers creating greater administrative burden on the mission president and his counselors. The India New Delhi Mission covers the entire northern half of India in addition to Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. The opening of northeast India would further burden mission leadership as they add another destination to their busy itinerary of locations to visit. Most locations with a church presence have a tiny number of members and require high involvement from mission leaders to facilitate the proper functioning of the Church in these locations.

Full-time missionary reports from India indicate that missionaries have only on occasion taught investigators from northeast India and very few, if any, have joined the LDS Church. A lack of native members in northeast India and abroad pose major barriers for establishing a core of members and leaders upon which to build. Considering the Church's primary method of expanding national outreach relies on active members relocating to cities and towns without an LDS presence established, the Church has yet to make any progress toward establishing a presence in northeast India due to a lack of members who would potentially relocate to northeast India.

The Church has not translated any basic teaching, gospel study, or proselytism materials into indigenous languages in Northeast India. With extremely few, if any, Latter-day Saints who speak these languages, the Church would likely rely on paid, non-LDS translators to complete initial translations of basic proselytism materials unless speakers of these languages who have sufficient skill and command of English join the Church and are available to participate in translation efforts.

Strong ties exhibited by some ethnolinguistic groups to particular Christian denominations, Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism may pose challenges for missionaries in teaching, baptizing, and retaining converts. The Church may experience persecution and

opposition from major Christian groups that regard the LDS Church as un-Christian and heretical, potentially reducing receptivity and member activity and convert retention rates.

Comparative Growth

The Church has a presence in all regions of India except the northeast. In east India, the Church operates one branch in Kolkata. In north India, the Church operates seven branches in New Delhi that form a member district but no other cities have an LDS presence. In south India, the Church has experienced the most rapid growth and reports presence in several major cities. A stake functions in Hyderabad and districts operate in Bangalore, Chennai, Coimbatore, Rajahmundry, and Visakhapatnam. In west India, the Church operates one branch each in Goa and Mumbai. Missionaries have served in Goa for many years and the first proselytizing missionaries began serving in Mumbai in 2012.

All other outreach-focused Christian groups that conduct missionary activity on a worldwide scale maintain a presence in Northeast India. Many Protestant groups have established a strong foothold among the traditionally animist peoples of northeast India such as the Naga and Chin. Nagaland is regarded as the "only predominantly Baptist state in the world."^[3] In 2010, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported 46,693 members, 183 churches, and 321 companies in six of the seven states of Northeast India. Adventists reported 424 members, one church, and 12 companies in Arunachal Pradesh, 4,849 members, 16 churches, and 60 companies in Assam, 16,770 members, 8,705 members, 40 churches, and 59 companies in Manipur, 57 churches, and 138 companies in Meghalaya, 15,161 members, 66 churches, and 48 companies in Mizo and Tripura, and 784 members, three churches, and four companies in Nagaland.^[4] Adventists translate publications into many of the indigenous languages of northeast India such as Assamese, Garo, Khasi, Mizo, Meitei, Naga, and Nepali.^[5] Jehovah's Witnesses report an extremely limited presence with congregations that operate in Assam (6), Sikkim (4), Manipur (1), Meghalaya (1), and Mizoram (1). No Witness congregations appear to operate in Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, or Tripura.^[6] Witnesses translate basic proselytism materials into Assamese, Khasi, Mizo, and Nepali.^[7] The Church of the Nazarene reports a small presence in Northeast India.

Limitations

The LDS Church does not release data on the number of members known to reside in northeast India. There is no geographical breakdown by region or administrative division of official annual membership totals for the Church in India. The Church does not provide data on the ethnic breakdown of worldwide or country membership and it is unclear how many individuals who belong to the indigenous ethnic groups of northeast India have joined the LDS Church.

Future Prospects

The outlook for a future LDS Church establishment in northeast India appears unlikely within the foreseeable future due to extremely limited numbers of full-time missionaries assigned to the Church's two Indian missions and the avoidance of mission leaders to open locations to proselytizing missionaries when there is no pre-established branch in the area. Long distance from mission headquarters in New Delhi and the immense geographic size of the mission that includes small numbers of members that meet in branches in three cities in India (New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata), several cities in Pakistan, one city in Nepal (Kathmandu); and one city in Bangladesh (Dhaka) suggest that the Church will not open northeast India to missionary activity until Kolkata has full-time missionaries assigned and there are small numbers of isolated members and investigators that petition mission and area leadership for an official church establishment.

[1] "Kuki-Chin-Naga," www.ethnologue.com, retrieved 19 August 2013. <http://www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/kuki-chin-naga>

[2] "Population by religious communities," censusindia.gov.in, retrieved 17 August 2013. http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_data_finder/C_Series/Population_by_religious_communities.htm

[3] Ninian, M.M. "History of Christianity in India," www.acns.com. <http://www.acns.com/~mm9n/articles/Indian%20Christianity/CHAPTER%20SIXTEEN.htm>

[4] "Northeast India Union Section (1984-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 19 August 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=U10079&Year=2012&submit=Change

[5] "Statistical Report for 2010 - Languages and Dialects in which Seventh-day Adventist Publications are now in Print", p. 81. sda.org.

[6] "Congregation Meeting Search," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 19 August 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/E_FRNsPnPBrtZGT

[7] "Featured Items," [jw.org](http://www.jw.org), retrieved 20 August 2013. <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/?contentLanguageFilter>

