

History of Christianity in India

Volume V, Part 5

North East India in the
Nineteenth and
Twentieth Centuries



FREDERICK S. DOWNS

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Christianity in India

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VOLUME V, PART 5**

NORTH-EAST INDIA IN THE NINETEENTH
AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

EDITED BY S. B. H. S.



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AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

by

Frederick S. Downs



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Bangalore - 1992

CHAI History of Christianity in India

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- II: History of Christianity in India from the Middle of the Sixteenth Century to the End of the Seventeenth Century (1542-1700)
- III: History of Christianity in India during the Eighteenth Century
- IV: History of Christianity in South India during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries
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FOREWORD

The Editorial Board of the Church History Association of India is happy to bring out a new book in the CHAI History of Christianity in India series. Volume II was published in 1982 and Volume I in 1984. Originally volumes IV (South India) and V (North India) dealing with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were to consist of a series of studies written by different authors covering specified areas within the region, but published in two volumes. This approach was abandoned when it was realised that authors were not readily available or in a position to complete all the area studies at or near the same time. This would have led to a long delay in publication. Accordingly in 1987 the Editorial Board decided that the several area studies, or parts, within Volumes IV and V should be published separately. This decision also enables the authors to include more material in the "parts" than had been originally planned.

Late in 1990 the first "part" under this new policy was published: Volume IV, Part 2, **Tamilnadu in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries** by Hugald Grafe. Because the material was ready, this "part" was published before Volume III. That volume was incomplete when its author, E.R. Hambye, died with the result that it is being completed by a group of scholars who will require some time before they complete their work.

Similarly, the present "part", Volume V, Part 5, is being brought out prior to Volume III or other parts of Volumes IV and V. It is the result of some thirty years of study of the history of Christianity in North East India by its author, Dr Frederick S. Downs. Born and raised in North East India, he joined the faculty of the Eastern Theological College, Jorhat, Assam, in 1961 and shifted to the United Theological College, Bangalore, in 1971. He is now Chairperson of the Department of the History of Christianity in that institution. He became a member of the CHAI Editorial Board in 1975

and has served on it ever since. He has been active in the Church History Association of India, serving as its Vice-President from 1985 to 1988, and has been Executive Editor of the **Indian Church History Review** from 1974 to 1985, and from 1988 to the present. He is the author of a large number of books and scholarly articles on the history of Christianity in North East India, and is widely regarded an authority on the subject. The Department of History of the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, will soon bring out a volume of his writings.

In his writings, Dr Downs has placed strong emphasis on social history. He is concerned with the impact Christianity has had upon the peoples of North East India, particularly the tribal peoples inhabiting the hill areas where the main concentrations of Christians are to be found. A recurring theme of his writing is that Christianity in India must be understood from the perspective of the Indian people, rather than from the perspective of mission societies or foreign churches. This, and his long standing interest in ecumenics makes him uniquely qualified to write the "part" on Christianity in North East India during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from the perspectives laid down by the Editorial Board.

The history of Christianity in India is viewed as an integral part of the socio-cultural history of the Indian people rather than as separate from it. The history will therefore focus attention upon the Christian people in India; upon who they were and how they understood themselves; upon their social, religious, cultural and political encounters; upon the changes which these encounters produced in them and in their appreciation of the Christian gospel as well as in the Indian culture and society of which they themselves were a part. These elements constitute the history of Christianity in India, and are not to be merely chapters tacked on to the end of an institutional study. This history should, therefore, provide an insight into the changing identity of the Christian people of India through the centuries.

The present book is a substantially revised and updated version of the author's **Christianity in North East India : Historical Perspectives** published in 1983. In it he examines the history of the most rapidly growing segment of the Indian Church in relation to its political, ecclesiastical and socio-cultural dimensions. The Editorial Board decided to divide the subject into regions (North and South) and areas within regions (parts) because this necessarily followed from its premise that the socio-cultural context must be taken seriously. While particular ecclesiastical bodies undertook work in several parts of the country, any study that concentrates on the impact of particular contexts in plural-cultural India must use the region as the unit of study. Precisely because of the substantial differences in context, the "part" studies will need to approach their subject differently. Hence this study of Christianity in the North East is quite different in structure from that on Tamilnadu in the same period. Anyone with even the most superficial knowledge of the history of Christianity in India will know, for instance, that the nature of the Christian community is completely different in Uttar Pradesh than it is in Kerala.

Thus while the political context is important to a study of Christianity anywhere, the fact that Christians play a dominant role in North East Indian politics—indeed having a virtual monopoly on it in three of the seven sister states in the region—means that the political dimension must be given more attention in that region than elsewhere. Similarly the region has a balance of Christian traditions unique to itself in India. Finally, the author deals with the complexities of the relationship between Christianity and social change in a region where it has had an influence on that process far greater than in other parts of the country. Of course, any study of the North East is complicated by the fact that though a relatively small region it has a cultural plurality which mirrors that of the entire nation. Undoubtedly this book will make an important contribution to the understanding of the much misunderstood role of Christianity in a much misunderstood part of India.

It represents the standards of scholarship, and freshness of perspective that have led to the enthusiastic reception both in India and abroad of the earlier volumes that have been published. We regret that we have not been able to progress with the work as rapidly as we had hoped, but we are gratified with the progress that has already been made. Three books have already been published. This is the fourth, for which we are deeply grateful to its author, Dr Frederick S. Downs. We are hopeful that a few more will be coming out shortly. In the words of the first General Editor, the late Dr D.V. Singh, it is our hope that, "the unflinching faith of the wellwishers, the sincere efforts of the authors and the members of the Editorial Board, and the encouraging response of the readers are sufficient to ensure that the project will steadily advance towards a fuller realization, to present a comprehensive history of Christianity in the socio-political and cultural context of the Indian people."

We are thankful for the friends who have continued to encourage and support the project. We would not have been able to proceed with our work were it not for the generous grants made by the National Council of Churches in India, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, Leonard Theological College (Jabalpur), Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram (Bangalore), Simon Cardinal Pimenta (Archbishop of Bombay), the Theological Education Fund/Programme on Theological Education (an affiliate of the World Council of Churches), Pontifical Society for the Propagation of Faith (Rome), Congregation for the Oriental Churches (Rome), Gesellschaft für Missionswissenschaft (Germany), and, for Volume IV, Part 2, the Evangelical Lutheran Mission (Leipzig Mission), Hildesheim (Germany) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brunswick (Germany).

Dharmaram College
Bangalore
1 January 1992

A.M. Mundadan, C.M.I.
General Editor

Adincha
VESHU SWILOP

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

It is not possible to name all those persons who, over the years, have contributed to my efforts to understand the history of the Christian movement in North East India. This book represents the fruits of more than thirty years of scholarly study, and a life time of association with the peoples of that extraordinary part of India. It is to them, the people of the "seven sisters" of the North East that I dedicate this book as an expression of my gratitude.

I would also like to thank the members of the Editorial Board of the Church History Association of India who went through the manuscript and made valuable suggestions. My special thanks are extended to the consultants, Dr Fr George Kottuppallil, SDB, and Rev Dr J. Fortis Jyrwa, whose suggestions were of great value at the stage of final revision. Thanks also to Dr David J. Syiemlieh of the North-Eastern Hill University who volunteered to read and comment on the full manuscript.

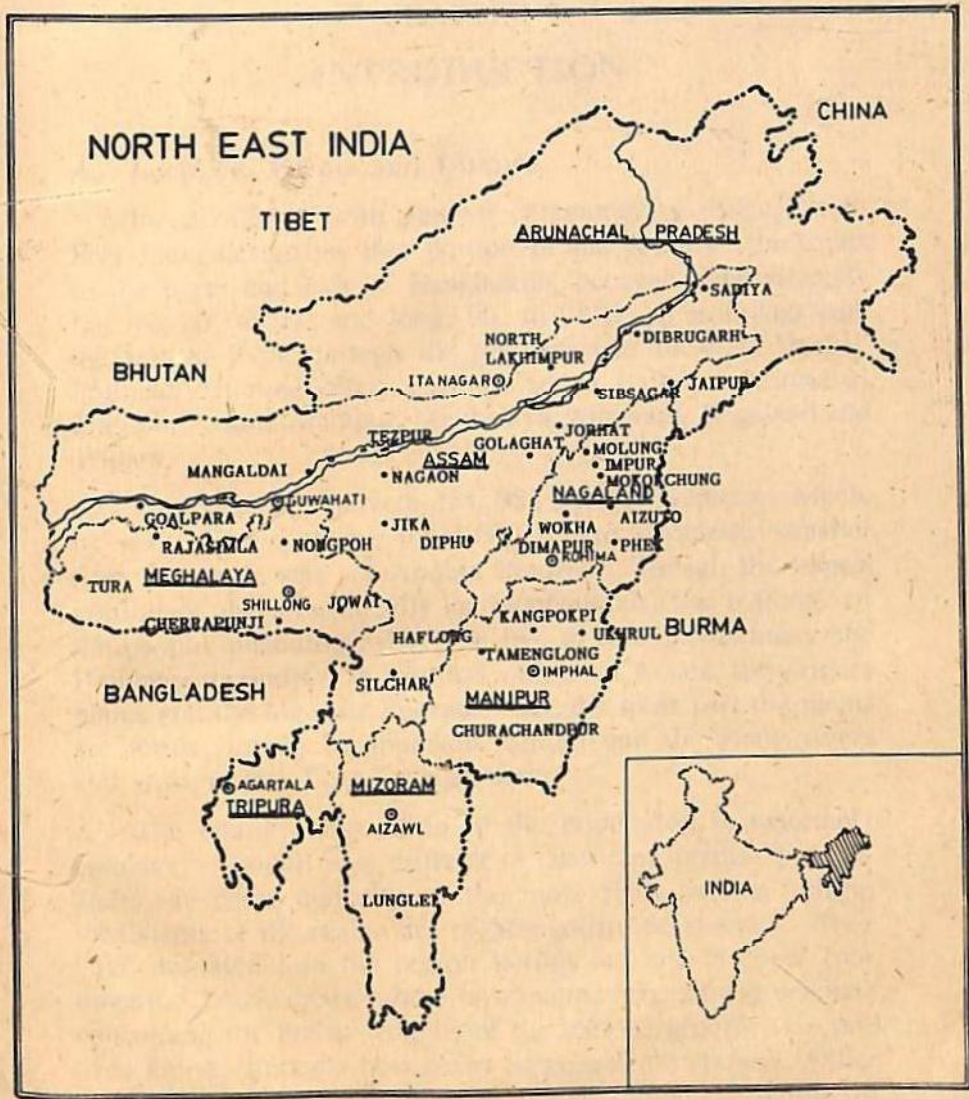
United Theological College
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Frederick S. Downs

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Location, People and Culture

In accordance with general contemporary usage, North East India designates that portion of the country which lies to the north and east of Bangladesh, between approximately Lat. N. 20' to 29' and long. 90' to 98'E. It is linked with the rest of India through the northern part of West Bengal. Politically it now consists of the seven states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

The entire area covers 254, 993 square kilometres which, by way of comparison, is 25,000 square kilometres smaller than the single state of Andhra Pradesh. Though the largest portion of the area is hilly or mountainous, the majority of the people inhabiting the region live in four plains areas: the Brahmaputra and Barak (Surma) valleys of Assam, the Tripura plains and the Manipur Plateau.¹ For the most part the plains are fertile, thanks to abundant rainfall and the many rivers and streams that flow through them.

The ethnic composition of the population is extremely complex. Though it is difficult to determine precise percentages, the great majority of the more than twenty million inhabitants of the region are of Mongolian racial stock. They have migrated into the region during the last three or four thousand years, though there is no agreement among scholars concerning the precise origins of the various groups. No one even knows precisely how many languages are spoken. Other than establishing the point that there is much diversity in origin, culture and history of the many distinct groups inhabiting

1. Approximately 78% in 1971. Due to disturbances in Assam no census could be taken in the State in 1981, and details of the 1991 census are not yet available.

the North East, the extensive academic debate on such questions is not important for our purposes. Suffice it to say that estimates of the number of languages spoken in the region, language being indicative of cultural diversity, put the number of major language groups at fifty, with perhaps as many as one hundred and fifty minor groups.² Though a majority of the people speak Sanskrit-based languages (mainly Assamese and Bengali), the linguistic and hence cultural diversity of the region has played a major role in its historical development.³

Another way of classifying the people in the North East, which is especially useful for a study of the impact of Christianity, is to distinguish between those who were and were not sanskritized before the coming of the British in the 1820s.⁴ The progress of sanskritization prior to the British advent is thus described by S. Barkataki:

2. In a very incomplete survey of the region, Rakshat Puri identifies no less than 42 major tribes. "Towards Security in the North-East: Transportation and Nationalism, in K. Suresh Singh, ed., *Tribal Situation in India* (1972), pp. 98-100. (Hereafter referred to as Singh, *Tribal Situation*). E.H. Pakyntein notes that according to the list of scheduled tribes in the Indian Constitution, *Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Lists Modification Order, 1956*, there are 83 main tribes in Assam (including what later became Meghalaya and Mizoram), Manipur and Tripura alone. The tribes of Nagaland and Arunachal had not yet been scheduled at that time. "Tribal Communities in India," in M.M. Thomas and R.W. Taylor, eds., *Tribal Awakening* (1965), pp. 3-4. Pakyntein does not include the non-tribal linguistic groups in his figures. In 1967 George Gillespie identified 52 language groups within a single denomination, the Council of Baptist Churches in North East India. "Baptists in Babel," unpublished manuscript. Stephen Fuchs, in a study of the migrations and classifications of the various groups in the North East names well over 60—and makes no claims that he is dealing with any but representative tribes. "The Races of North East India," *IMR*, 12. 3&4 (Sept.-Dec. 1990), pp. 160-72.
3. See S.L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam* (1985), Ch. 1, for a useful discussion of the diversity of the region in general, and of the present Assam in particular.
4. I have followed M.N. Srinivas in using the term "sanskritized" instead of other terms commonly used to describe the same process, e.g., "hinduized" or "aryanized". Srinivas first introduced the term in his *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of Southern India* (1952).

A very significant fact about Assam is the fusion which took place here of Aryan and Mongolian cultures. We find here an example of how a dominant culture, although supported numerically by a few, can seep into, and impose itself on, weaker cultures. Thus we find in Assam, a population by and large Mongolian but speaking at present Assamese, which is an Aryan Sanskritic language. This happened not merely because of the superiority of Aryan languages over the rude tribal dialects but also because of the absorbing power and influence of Hinduism. The Brahmins from northern India succeeded in absorbing into Hinduism all the tribal people of the plains including the powerful Ahoms who ruled Assam for over six hundred years and who in course of time not only adopted the Hindu religion, discarding their own, but also forgot their own Shan language and adopted Assamese.⁵

Without understanding this historical process, or understanding that religions arrived in the region accompanied by advocates who assumed social, political and economic roles, it is not possible to understand either the present political situation in Assam or the historical dynamics of the time when Christianity first entered that state on a significant scale in the nineteenth century.

The plains people's fear of the fierce tribes, as well as the remoteness of their villages, had prevented significant penetration of sanskritic culture into the hills. Whatever penetration had begun to take place was stopped with the arrival of the British. Goswami notes, by way of example, that though the Khasis and Garos of Meghalaya had begun to absorb some of the cultural traits of the Hindus, "with the arrival of the Christian missionaries, the people, for various reasons, became apathetic towards the religion of the non-tribal Hindus."⁶ O.L. Snaitang develops a somewhat different

5. *Assam* (1969), pp. 7-8.

6. In Singh, *Tribal Situation*, pp. 277-8.

thesis. He argues that while there had been contact between the Khasi-Jaintia people and their plains Hindu neighbours over an extended period of time, those contacts were so limited that the Khasi-Jaintia society was able to assimilate whatever influences there were without changing the nature of its own socio-cultural system. It was only after the British had imposed their alien administration that the penetration of the plains Hindus into the hills was on such a large scale that the traditional ways of assimilation were ineffective.⁷ One of the functions of Christianity, sociologically speaking, was to help the hills tribes preserve their identity in the face of the perceived new threat of assimilation into the Hindu societies of the plains at what M.N. Srinivas and R.D. Sanwal refer to as "the lowest level of the socio-ritual hierarchy."⁸ British administrative policies discouraged further sanskritization and for the most part encouraged the maintenance of distinct tribal identities. Thus the two groups, the sanskritized plains people and the hills people, some of whom became Christian, came to be clearly defined and separate. Subsequent social and political movements in the hills areas can only be understood in light of this development.

With respect to religion, the plains people are, as has been noted, substantially Hindu. There is a Muslim minority of about 19% in the region as a whole, and 25% in Assam

7. "A Study of the Role of Christianity in Social Change among the Khasi and Jaintia Hill Tribes of Meghalaya from 1841 to the Present" (United Theological College, D. Th. Dissertation, 1990). (Hereafter referred to as Snaitang, Social Change). See especially "Ch. II: Identity and Change among the Khasi Jaintia People in the Pre-Nineteenth Century Period."
8. "Some Aspects of Political Development in the North-Eastern Hill Areas of India," in Singh, *Tribal Situation*, p. 121. Interestingly, Major-General Sir James Johnstone, writing in 1894, anticipated assimilation to the Muslim rather than the Hindu community. "I fear they [the Angami Nagas] will be gradually corrupted and lose the good qualities, which have made them attractive in the past, and that, as time goes on, unless some powerful counter influence is brought to bear on them, they will adopt the vile, bigoted type of Moham-medanism prevalent in Assam and Cachai..." *Manipur and the Naga Hills* (reprinted 1971), p.44. He did not give any reasons why he thought Muslim influence would be greater than Hindu.

alone (1971), but it has had little impact on the general population. Vaishnavite influence is particularly strong and the fact that, with the exception of the Brahmins, the majority of caste Hindus are the descendants of non-Aryan converts (sanskritization having begun in the medieval period) accounts for the unique character of Hinduism in the region. In the Barak valley and Tripura, and to a lesser extent in portions of Lower Assam,⁹ Bengali forms of Hinduism are predominant.

It is more difficult to generalize about the cultures of the hills tribes than persons unfamiliar with the area might suppose. Anything that one says is subject to qualification. Each of the many small tribes has traditionally live in isolation from the others, and each has its own distinct history which is often quite different from that of other tribes. Consequently each tribe has its own culture and social structure. The situation is further complicated by the fact that among most tribes the village was an autonomous unit, a kind of village-state, which was often in conflict with neighbouring villages of the same tribe. Hence among tribes like the Tangkhuls of Manipur, each village developed its own dialect which was unintelligible to people of the same tribe belonging to distant villages. Social systems range from the matrilineal to the patriarchal, and political structures from elected village headmen (as among the Aos) to powerful hereditary chieftainships (as among the Mizos and Konyaks). Not surprisingly, there was also considerable variety in their religious beliefs and practices. With the exception of a few small Buddhist groups in Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Mizoram, the traditional tribal religions

9. The terms "upper", "central", and "lower" when used in relation to the Brahmaputra valley of Assam relate to the westward flow of the river. Hence, Upper Assam is the area at the easternmost reaches of the river as it enters the valley from Arunachal, with Dibrugarh and Sibsagar being important centres. Central Assam is the area in which Tezpur and Nagaon are the principal towns, and Lower Assam is the westernmost area in which the city of Guwahati (and its suburb, the state capital, Dispur) is located. Another common geographical distinction is made between the North Bank and the South Bank of the Brahmaputra. All these geographical designations refer only to the plains area.

were of the primal type.¹⁰ Within that broad classification there was and is much variety. Most of the tribes had a concept of benevolent gods, including gods of creation and gods responsible for general human welfare to whom periodical sacrifices were made, but most of the actual religious practice consisted in sacrifices and observances of taboos designed to propitiate malevolent spirits.¹¹

B. Christianity and North East India

To understand the nature of the Christian movement in North East India one must begin with the Treaty of Yandabo, concluded between the English East India Company and the Kingdom of Burma on 24 February 1826 at the end of the first Anglo-Burman War. For the first time in its history the region was linked politically with a major Indian power. Though there had been earlier contacts with Aryan India, the various kingdoms, chieftainships and tribal village-states of the area had existed outside the political structures of the major North Indian powers. The one exception was the Mughal empire the borders of which, in the mid-eighteenth century, lay just to the west of Guwahati and hence included a small portion of the present Kamrup district and all of Goalpara district of Assam. Mughal efforts to penetrate further were unsuccessful, with the exception of a few years in the latter part of the seventeenth century when an expeditionary force advanced as far as the modern town of Sibsagar in Upper Assam.

While many of the peoples of the plains areas of Assam and Manipur had been sanskritized and there had been immigration into the region from the west, the ruling powers had always been of Mongolian or tribal origin (Bodos, Koches,

10. Commonly but improperly called "animism".

11. For discussion of the relative importance given to the high gods and the spirits, see Lal Dena, *Christian Missions and Colonialism: A Study of Missionary Movement in North East India with Particular Reference to Manipur and Lushai Hills 1894- 1947* (1988), p. 87ff. (Hereafter referred to as Lal Dena)

Chutiyas, Kacharis, Ahoms, Jaintias, Khasis, Nagas and the like) and hence ethnically distinct.

The gradual extension of British administration following the Treaty of Yandabo brought widespread changes. The entire area, previously fragmented politically, was brought under the control of a single government and the traditional ruling elite in the plains of Assam was displaced by the British—and by the Hindu immigrants from the west and south that they brought with them.¹² Within one hundred years British administration was gradually extended throughout the region. It brought with it irreversible forces of economic, social and cultural change.

Christian missions, and the indigenous Christian communities brought into existence through their work, played an important role in this process. In the Brahmaputra valley of Assam they were instrumental in promoting a renaissance of the Assamese language and culture which preserved a distinct identity for that culture in the face of Bengali encroachment under British patronage. But this influence had waned by the end of the nineteenth century, and the number of Christians among the Assamese proper remained very small. The greatest impact was among the tribal peoples; both those living in the plains areas and those inhabiting the hills. For the tribals, Christianity provided a means of preserving their identities and promoting their interests in the face of powerful forces of change. In the process Christianity also tended to reenforce traditional animosity between the hills tribes and the plains peoples. Though this was not intentional on the part of the Christian missions, the largest of which created ecclesiastical structures that embraced Christian congregations in both the hills and plains, it is very difficult to promote particular identities without undermining a larger regional or national identity—or at least not providing motivation for creating such larger identities when efforts began to be made to do so. ✓

12. See B.B. Goswami, "The Tribes of Assam: A Few Comments on Their Social and Cultural Ties with the Non-Tribes", in Singh, *Tribal Situation*, pp. 272-5.

This is not a problem unique to North East India, of course. What is unique to that region is the fact that separatist tendencies have erupted into violent rebellions; rebellions that jeopardize the security of an important border region. Though the major armed rebellions have been confined to a relatively small part of the area, they are symptomatic of widespread discontent which had led, within the past thirty years to the establishment of a number of new political units and constant pressure to create even more. All this represents a fear of change, particularly those changes that threaten traditional identities and vested interests. In this process of political and social adjustment, Christianity or at least Christians have played a prominent role. A more prominent role than in any other part of the country.

The history of the Christian movement in the North East can only be understood as an integral part of a larger process of change—political, social, economic, cultural and religious. First it is necessary to be familiar with the political developments that have been primarily responsible for introducing change. The introduction and subsequent history of Christianity is integral with this process. Though attention needs to be given to the various denominations that were established in the region by western missions, this aspect of the Christian movement should not be overemphasized because the impact of all Christian groups has been essentially the same. Finally, Christianity cannot be understood as integral to the life of the people in the region without analysis of its social impact. Only when the political, ecclesiastical and social dimensions are seen together can one begin to understand why Christianity is growing more rapidly in this part of the country than any other. In India as a whole the Christian population increased by 69% between 1951 and 1971, compared to a general population increase of 52%. In the North East the Christian population increased by 171%, compared with a general population increase of 117%, during the same period. Even these figures do not give the full picture because in 1971 some 75% of the total population of the region was found in Assam,

where Christian growth is the lowest.¹³ Northeastern Christians constituted 16.5% of the total Christian population in India in 1981 (up from 12% in 1971), nearly one half (45%) of all the Christians living outside the four southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.¹⁴

C. Sources

Because this history is written from a socio-cultural perspective, emphasizing the role of Christianity as a part of the total history of the peoples of North East India, and because of the distinctive problems associated with research about preliterate or newly literate communities it has of necessity to draw on a wide variety of sources. This includes the traditional primary documentary sources that historians use such as mission, church and government records (reports, minutes, official correspondence, private correspondence and

13. In the two census decades between 1961 and 1981 (complete census figures for the region are not available after that) the percentage growth of the Christian community (compared with percentage growth in the population of those states and, then union territories as a whole) in the states (some being union territories or parts of other states at the time) other than Assam was as follows. The statistics are based on the *Census of India* for 1951, 1961, 1971 and 1981. All subsequent references to Christian and general population figures are taken from the *Census of India* unless otherwise indicated. Due to disturbed conditions, the census could not be taken in Assam in 1981. Detailed data from the 1991 census was not available at the time this book went to press.

State	% growth of Xians (% growth of Population)	
	1961-71	1971-81
Manipur	84% (38%)	51% (31%)
Nagaland	76% (40%)	80% (50%)
Meghalaya	75% (32%)	48% (32%)
Tripura	57% (36%)	58% (32%)
Arunachal Pradesh		641% (35%)

14. According to the Census of 1901, Christians in the North East constituted 1.23% of the whole Christian population in India; by 1951 the proportion was 7.8%, in 1971, 12.5%, and in 1981, 16.5%. In 1981, 65.2% of India's Christians lived in the four southern states and Goa. 47.5% of those living outside the South were in the North East, compared with 39.8% in 1971.

books), as well as secondary studies of the missions, churches and individual Christians. While most of this material is published, some is found only in archives and private collections. The writer makes no claim to have exhausted such sources. Much work remains to be done in libraries and archives both in India and abroad. The Christian missions which worked in the North East were based in England, Wales, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Germany and Italy. Many important records in several different western languages have yet to be carefully examined and utilized by historians. Much of the personal correspondence of the missionaries belonging to one of the most important Protestant missions that worked in the region, the Welsh Presbyterian Mission, was carried out in the Welsh language. No scholar working in India knows that language. Similarly the linguistic challenge provided by the indigenous ecclesiastical sources written in perhaps as many as one hundred different languages is formidable. While there are studies of Christianity among particular tribes that have drawn on such indigenous sources, the work of collecting and cataloguing them (let alone of translating them into a common language) has not even begun. There are similar problems in relation to the use of the minds of the older generation of Christians whose memories, in some cases, go back to the very beginnings of the Christian movement among their people. This history has used sources of all the types mentioned above, but has not even begun to exhaust their potential.

The great majority of Christians in the North East come from a tribal background. Virtually all of those who lived in the hills areas were illiterate when Christianity was first introduced among them. While missionaries reduced their languages to a written form and produced the first literature, several generations were to pass before the people themselves began to produce a literature of their own. Thus while it is possible to find essentially institutional records produced by the inhabitants such as minutes and reports, there was very little indigenous literature produced until the recent past that takes us deeper into an understanding of Christianity in the

region from the perspective of the Christian people living there. In such a situation the effort to understand the movement must involve using secondary sources provided by other disciplines by the social sciences. Anthropology (especially Social Anthropology), Sociology, Political Science and even Philosophy (insofar as Philosophy includes the study of religion and culture) are especially valuable for this purpose. Much of the material produced by social scientists studying the North East is of direct relevance to the study of Christianity from a socio-cultural, as distinct from an institutional, perspective. Admittedly, much of the evidence provided by these social sciences is inferential in nature. But even accumulated circumstantial evidence—especially where direct evidence is not available—has its value if used with caution. This history, particularly the chapters on the social dimension, is heavily dependent on this kind of source. Given the unique (for India) nature of the relationship between Christianity and socio-political developments in the North East, I have of necessity also relied heavily on the work of academic historians who have studied political and economic developments in the region.

In seeking to understand the socio-cultural consequences of the introduction and growth of Christianity in North East India within the limitations imposed by the nature of the sources, historians cannot function as impersonal scientists. We here seek understanding that will be authenticated not simply on the dry pages of documents, but in the living interaction between historians and the peoples whose history they seek to penetrate and interpret.