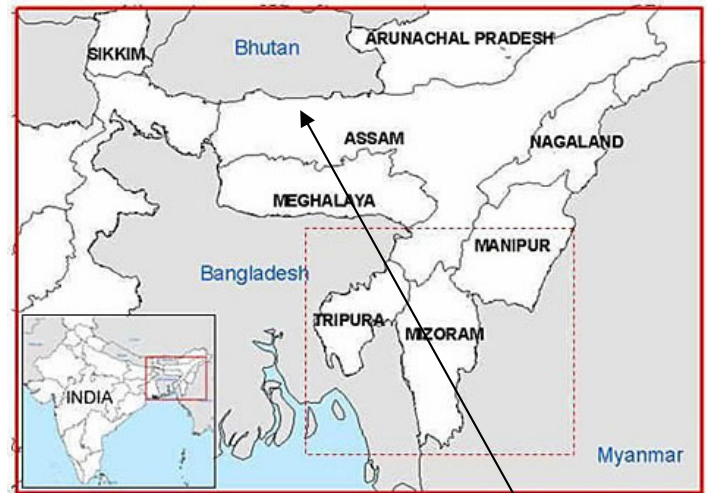


Visit to the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of the Northern Assam Deanery, Church of North India, 31st January – 3rd February 2008

Report by Rev. Christopher Harrison, Chairman of the Derbyshire Churches CNI Partnership Council

In early February I went to North East India on the invitation of the Northern Assam Deanery, to attend its Golden Jubilee festival.

Northern Assam – which lies between the great Brahmaputra river and the mountain kingdom of Bhutan – is one of the poorer parts of India, inhabited largely by various tribal peoples who mostly make a living from farming and working on the tea plantations. The churches in Northern Assam had been founded in the late 1800s by a USPG missionary, Rev. Sydney Endle, who is still regarded with great affection by North Assamese Christians as their spiritual father.



Bengbari

Today all wings of the Church are represented in this area, from Catholic to Evangelical, and also a strong Pentecostal element. The Golden Jubilee celebrations brought together around 5,000 Christians from the Bodo tribe in the small forest village of Bengbari, not far from the Bhutanese border. These had built a camp site of massive tents made from bamboo and straw for each congregation, with the centrepiece being a huge marquee capable of accommodating them all. This was the venue for four days of services running more or less continuously from 7.30 am until well into the evening.

Daily worship

A typical service would begin with several worship songs led by a choir, which could be heard throughout the campsite and alert everyone to the fact that the service was about to begin. There was no mains electricity – the powerful PA system was powered by a petrol-driven generator. As the worshippers arrived there would often be a ‘cultural presentation’, usually colourful and rhythmical tribal dancing. This was generally performed by young women, but there were also items by young men and – unusually - by older women, much to the delight of the congregation.

More worship songs and hymns would follow, led by the choir, with all of the five thousand or so worshippers joining together praising God. This would often lead into a time of prayer, led by the choir leader and interspersed with choruses. The songs were a splendid blend of the ancient (‘Abide with me’) and contemporary: western influences were evident, but a distinctly Indian feel to the music was given by the

subtle differences in harmonic and melodic patterns compared with European musical styles. Much work has clearly been done to translate hymns and Christian songs into Assamese and the Bodo tribal language – clergy and a few others used copies of a Bodo hymnbook, but most people seemed to know the hymns without needing this.

The worship was overseen by a chair person, who sat on the stage along with senior clergy and guests, beneath a great banner which on which the themes of the convention were set out: “Run the race that you may win the prize” (1 Cor. 9.24), and “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Phil. 4.4). A scripture reading would follow the hymns and choruses, after which the offertory took place, in which a large number of robed men and women passed what resembled children’s fishing nets through the thousands of worshippers, inviting gifts which were to be presented at the altar. This took place at each service, i.e. three times each day.

There would then follow a ‘special number’, usually another dance or musical item. After this came the sermon. The main preachers were the Bishop of North East India, the Rt. Revd. Purely Lyngdoh; the priest in charge of Christ Church, Guwahati (the state capital of Assam), Michael Herenze, who was also the Diocesan youth adviser; and myself. It was especially interesting to hear Michael Herenze’s thoughts on the theology of Jubilee, as he drew parallels between Old Testament concepts of liberation and justice and the current plight of the poor in India. I was asked to give the sermon on three occasions – I was told that if I spoke for less than an hour, people would feel short changed (although, thankfully, half of my allotted time was taken up by interpretation into Assamese and the Bodo tribal language). One of my talks was to a youth service (attended by people of all ages); the task of trying to teach several hundred people a two part Taizé round on the one word ‘Alleluia’ proved rather a challenge, however, as the women and girls kept joining in with the men and boys instead of singing their own part!

One of the highlights of the celebrations was a confirmation service for over 300 boys and girls, led by the Bishop. The full rite was used, notwithstanding the numbers involved; each candidate’s name was read out, at which point he or she stood up before coming forward for the laying on of hands. The huge numbers were a wonderful sign of the strength of the church in this area – and, according to the Bishop, services of similar size regularly take place elsewhere in the diocese. The churches in the Northern Assam deanery are clearly very mission-oriented, and are not afraid of aiming to convert people to Christianity even in a culture where this is sometimes difficult. That being said, the effects of the pioneering missionary work of the late 19th and early 20th century are still evident, as the Christian faith is handed on from one generation to another.

The camp site

Each of the eight pastorates in the Deanery had its own area of the campsite, with separate bamboo and straw tents for men and women, cooking areas, and sometimes a small café area where we could buy tea, coffee and snacks – although it proved difficult for guests such as myself to persuade our hosts to take payment for these. Cooking for the hundreds of people from each pastorate took place over a series of fires made from bamboo sold from a central point on the site. There was always a wonderfully festive atmosphere; everywhere there seemed to be children playing,

laughing, and wanting their photographs to be taken, people would cluster in large numbers around the kiosks selling Christian books and DVDs, and the café areas were always full of people talking and relaxing. The sheer colourfulness of the convention was remarkable, at least to western eyes, with the wonderful blend of traditional dress and modern clothing which characterizes India today.

The future

A similar convention takes place every year in the Northern Assam Deanery; this is a tradition which is held in common with many parts of the Indian church, especially in rural areas. The Golden Jubilee Convention was, of course, a particularly high point, but it would not surprise me if next year's event is already being planned. It is clearly a focal point for the life of the Deanery each year, and the effect of gathering several thousands of Christians for several days of worship and celebration must be a great encouragement to the faith of all concerned.

The Church in Northern Assam is not well resourced, in material terms, which reflects the wider divisions in the Indian churches between those in the more affluent (largely urban) areas, and those in the rural regions. Assam in general, and the Bodo tribal area in particular, is thought by many of its residents to have been neglected by central government in past years, although there are now signs of rapid economic growth in some parts, especially in and around Guwahati. Sporadic unrest and agitation for greater regional rights has been going on for some time now, with occasional bombings and shootings in some parts of Assam.

The churches of the Northern Assam Deanery are in very good heart, and would like to continue and develop our links. The Churches of the Alfreton area of Derbyshire, and Crich in particular, have a partnership with the diocese of North East India, although they have so far not had much contact with Northern Assam. Taddington school, in north Derbyshire, is also setting up a link with the school at Bengbari, where the convention took place.

We were told of some prayer needs, in particular a new primary school and mission station which is being set up within the Deanery. Neither the Deanery as a whole nor any of its clergy have a car or similar vehicle, which is a major problem in view of how scattered the various churches are.

The churches of the Northern Assam Deanery are a great inspiration to their diocese, and a shining example of the way in which the Holy Spirit can move whole communities to renewal and growth in faith. I hope that the seeds of much mutual enrichment between the Derbyshire churches and Northern Assam have been sown, and that we can continue to walk together as partners in mission in the years to come.

Christopher Harrison
March 2008