

Publishing Challenges in North East India

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In North East India (NEI), indigenous Christian publishers are *more* successful than local educational, trade, and children's book publishers. How is this possible?

Profile of the region

The northeastern frontier region of India consists of seven states, also known as the Seven Sisters: Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Naga-

land and Tripura. They make up almost eight percent of the Indian land mass and close to four percent of the population. NEI's people are of Mongolian descent. While 20 percent are in towns, where there are railways, 80 percent live in rural areas with less transportation.

There are social, cultural, and linguistic differences not only between states, but within each state. Over 50

languages are spoken in the region. Of these, India's constitution, which gives official recognition to 15 languages, includes only one, Assamese, but it is not a *lingua franca*. Assamese, however, was the first language used when modern publishing began in the region—which started with Christian publishing.

Literature development in

NEI came with the expansion of colonial rule in the late nineteenth century. When missionaries arrived in 1836 from Calcutta, they came with a printing press. Their first publication was *Arunodoue*, a small newspaper edited by Miles Brownson, a Baptist missionary, followed by religious and other reading materials into additional local languages.

Publishing in NEI today

There are three principal areas of publishing.

EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING:

The school market—traditionally, book publishing's largest and most lucrative sector—is dominated by large publishers based in Delhi or Calcutta. Vernacular textbook publishing is controlled by each state government, so books are often printed by government presses. Thus, small publishers in the region have little chance to enter into the schoolbook market.

GENERAL TRADE AND CHILDREN'S BOOKS:

NEI's cultural diversity supplies multitudes of stories for local publications, but mak-

ing such books available to readers is not easy. There are few local authors and publishers, and they face many difficulties. Small quantity print runs are not economically viable. The best printers are far away, in Delhi, and local ones are not professional. Marketing and promotion are hard as well.

CHRISTIAN PUBLISHING:

By comparison with the above two sectors of the book industry, religious publishing is doing better. Christian publishers often have greater assets, as most inherited the publication works from missionaries. One example is Christian Literature Centre (CLC), in Assam. Founded by missionaries, CLC has since become a registered society under the Indian Societies Act XXI of 1860.

Christian publishers are frequently affiliated with a particular denomination, as is the case with the Mizo Presbyterian Synod Communication Department. This publisher has the added advantage that there is one



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common language in Mizoram state, so its target market is very well-defined.

Christian products have a long shelf life. CLC, for example, publishes a church hymnal. Though the revenue per unit is low, the hymnal is one of the company's most

readers. Even among literate people, book-buying habits are far from satisfactory.

POVERTY

NEI's average per capita income is lower than India's national average, by about one third. Its people are financially hard pressed.

Author Guild was formed in 1974 to promote and protect the interests of authors—but a chapter has yet to be formed in the region. Though there are NEI authors in their own right, the economic realities of local publishing lead some to seek

heritage and instruments of social communication and life-long education. He argued that without a solid foundation of books, a nation must depend on outside elements for its intellectual sustenance. If churches planted among the NEI's 200

Christian publishers are literature pioneers in the region.

profitable publications, as it is always in demand. *A Corner In India*, by Mary Mead Clark, is a fictionalized account of how Christianity came to Nagaland. First published in 1978, this title has since sold more than 15,000 copies. Another CLC book, *The Mighty Works of God*, by F.S. Downs, is in its third reprint.

Towards viable indigenous publishing

Despite some successes, most Christian literature ministries—and indeed, all publishers in NEI—face great challenges.

LOW LITERACY

NEI peoples' stories and traditions passed from generation to generation by oral means. Oral learning still predominates today, and literacy rates range from 50 to 60 percent depending on the language and the state. Therefore, Christian publishers (such as CLC) engage in promoting literacy. A viable market will only be possible with more new and constant

Authors, publishers and readers all face the same situation. A lack of resources means that low payments are offered to authors, so there is little incentive towards creativity. Publishers with little capital have low print runs—this automatically fixes the per unit cost higher. This, in turn, means it is harder for customers to buy books and, consequently, for publishers to make a profit.

LACK OF TRAINING

The book business is still treated as uncommon. Training for editing, design, production, marketing and financial administration is needed. A publication's success or failure depends on distribution, yet this is often ignored, neglected, or poorly appreciated. There is no "sales rep" culture in the region today, nor is direct mail in use.

The books published do not always meet indigenous needs; Christian publishers rely on translations and devotionals. Training for writers is essential. India's

publication in other parts of India, rather than locally.

Abul Hasan, in *Book Publishing in India: An Overview* (Patna: Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, 1989) wrote that indigenous languages are vehicles of cultural

tribal groups are to be self-sustaining in the long run, Christian publishers must continue in their role as literature pioneers in the region, proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ through the printed word. ♦

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