

PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN THE NORTH-EAST

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Introductory Remarks

It was very thoughtful of Dr. Pratap C. Gine, Vice-Principal of Theology Department to think of publishing a festschrift at the sixtieth birthday of the Principal of the College, Dr. Lalchungnunga. It also coincided with his retirement from his services to the College as well. I may take note of the fact that it is first time that a principal is being honored such a way by his colleagues, though others too have retired from the College in the past. It shows the respect, affection and appreciation, Dr. Lalchungnunga and Pi Hliri have earned through their association with the College. There is no doubt that Dr. Lalchungnunga came to the College during some troublesome times, a time of mistrust and efficacy of the College to continue good relations with the churches and society in the north-east. His coming to College had healed the wounds that the College had inflicted upon some of its constituencies in the north-east. He has brought some freshness to the college as he gave new colors to the College buildings and repaired the heritage Carey House. Re-establishment of relations with the William Carey University and Foundation is also one of his major contributions to the College.

At this time, I wish to join many of his friends and admirers in felicitating him and wishing him continued life of active service to the church and society, as he always had, in the time to come. He hails from the north-east, I too have special bond of affection for the north-east, let me contribute this article by way of felicitation to him and Pi Hliri.

Preliminary

I was invited for the inauguration function of new branches at MTh level to Aizawl Theological College in the first week of June 2011, but could not go as the flight was cancelled due to bad weather. This was the second time that I realized the problems people face in traveling to north-east. I prepared this paper as a prelude, though revised in certain places, to a detailed one yet to be finalized.

Since 1994, I had formed a very close and emotional relationship with the people of north-east in general. It was the year, I moved with my father, for the first time, to the north-east, to live and extend my ministry in theological education. As we were entering into Guwahati, my father came out of his AC coach, to look at the mighty Brahmaputra, and, like a good Brahmin father/teacher, cautioned me of the pitfall of a bachelor/Brahmachari Brahmin in the land of beautiful and enchanting North-east; 'Be careful', he revealed the sacred quote from the Hindu Scripture, Purana to me (I have yet to look for the exact reference), 'the land, and people, may en-cage you forever, and you will never be free from its spell'. He indeed was prophetic; I, though left the North-east within three years after his death in Shillong, certainly remained one of the admirers and well-wisher of the people of the North-east.

Theological Education in North East

When I joined the Senate in 2004, one of my mandates was to up-grade BTh colleges into BD colleges. I started in earnest, and was fully successful in convincing colleges in the North-east, but utterly failed in my attempts, in the case of colleges in the rest of India. I am more than content that all the ten theological colleges in the North-east are BD colleges, a feat that is not yet attained in other regions in India. This feat is not appropriately, and sufficiently, recognized by many of us in the Senate, but its significance for theological and general education in the North-east can not be overlooked. Unlike rest of India, theological education is well recognized in the North-east Indian society. Its efficacy and value is well accepted by the Government, the Church and society alike.

One can only appreciate the ever extending and strong support of the churches in the north-east to theological education. There has been a discussion among theological educators, initiated a few years ago, by the present Master, then the President of the Senate of Serampore College. It revolves around the

question, who owns theological colleges and who controls them. In the context of Serampore, most of theological colleges are owned by the churches, and obviously they control them. It is often alleged by some that theological colleges in control of churches are leading to disaster in theological education; as it is reasoned out, theological colleges have become the battle-ground of politics in the church, and only those who are not wanted in the church are sometimes accommodated in theological colleges, bringing down the academic excellence of the colleges. It is also alleged that that non-ordained/non-church controlled staff are to be blamed for the decline in theological education as they are not under the discipline of the church (-leaders??). The allegations are yet to be thoroughly probed into and verified; if need be, remedial action should be taken. Fortunately, situation of the colleges in the North-east is not as alarming as that of other parts. This is healthy for the development of theological education in the region. One should not overlook the support theological institutions in the north-east receive from the state governments. Some theological colleges receive indirect grant for infra-structure, whereas others receive direct aid-in-grants. Most of the students from the north-east, irrespective of where they study, receive government scholarships for theological studies. Out of seven (now eight, including Sikkim) sister states of the north-east, three states -Meghalaya, Nagaland Mizoram grant scholarship to theological students. Not many are informed that one has to seek permission to open theological institution from the Ministry of Higher Education Department of the Government of Nagaland. Like Senate of Serampore College, the Government uses a criterion to recognize theological institutions in the state. State recognizes staff with degrees from the Senate of Serampore University, Asia Theological Association (ATA), Senate of India Institute of Missiology (IIM) and recognized foreign degrees. The Nagaland Government underlines that only Serampore degrees are recognized for employment in State Services. The Government of Nagaland recognizes twenty-four theological colleges under its own criteria, out of which only three are affiliated to Serampore. Furthermore, any consideration for higher theological education in the region should take note of growth of theological graduates as well registration in theological courses in the region. One can also note the graph of students registering themselves for theological education from this region through the colleges in the North-east, just for the statistical support for higher theological education in the region. It is helpful to note the following statistics involving north-east students in the last five years, for an analysis:

I: National statistics of registration in BD course

Year	Total registration	NE registration	Percentage
2010	1341	441	32.9%
2009	1028	340	33.1%
2008	898	317	35.3%
2007	744	283	38%
2006	753	241	32%

II: National statistics of graduates in three degree courses

Year	Course	Total graduates	NE Graduates	Percentage
2010	MTh	100	18	18%
	BD	665	248	37.30%
	BTh	343	76	22.45%
2009	MTh	100	16	16%
	BD	689	221	32%
	BTh	334	57	14.5%
2008	MTh	75	4	5.3%
	BD	662	213	32.2%
	BTh	319	68	21.4%
2007	MTh	87	3	3%
	BD	615	187	30.4%
	BTh	296	66	22.6%
2006	MTh	78	6	7.7%

BD	609	214	35.1%
BTh	321	73	22.7%

Following observations drawn from above statistics will be helpful:

- i. As BD is gradually introduced in all affiliated colleges, admission and graduation of percentage of BD students is also increasing.
- ii. As many students from North-east are also seeking admission in Serampore affiliated colleges in other parts of India, we can safely add 10% more to get a fair picture of the students from North-east registering for Serampore BD degree course.
- iii. One can note the general increase in the strength of students in the colleges in the north-east at the MTh level;
- iv. Increase in percentage is proportionate to increase in number in centres as well as introduction of MTh in different branches.
- v. It is, obvious, from these BD graduates, candidates for MTh studies will go up if the facilities for higher theological education are provided in the region itself.
- vi. Though data is not available, women students often outnumber men students in theological institutions in the region.

Higher theological education for Laity

Serampore has been offering theological education programmes for the laity almost for last a quarter of century. A cursory look at the statistics available informs us that 996 have taken our external theological courses (DipCS and BCS). We may not be able to say with certainty how many of these graduates are from the north east; I can only guess, there may not be many. There is not much difficulty in understanding a kind of hesitation from the part of north-eastern people for theological education; they take it for granted that theological education is related only the pastoral work; their pietistic environment does not allow many to take up theological education; moreover, the medium of theological education also cause problem for many of them. Senate has recognized Mizo language for studies DipCS and BCS courses, and may not be averse to extend the same privilege to other languages of the region, in which university or secondary level of studies are available (Ao language may soon be added). This aspect of theological education that it should be available to everyone who wishes to have an informed understanding of his/her faith is worth some consideration on our part. Further, the churches in the north-east have a strong system of church elders who have sustained the church-structures and devotional life of the churches in this region; we are challenged to offer courses that will be helpful to them in their ministry. Churches and theological colleges need to take this part of their responsibility seriously. Senate is willing to offer courses so devised as per the needs and requirements of the context and region.

Higher theological education in the North-east

Post-graduate studies in theology are not new in this region. Eastern Theological College, Jorhat was first to introduce these courses way back in 1997 but its growth and continuity of the programmes have been far from satisfactory. It is somehow carrying it on, though some times, it gives us an impression that it is only for the sake of prestige and show piece. I sincerely hope that ETC community, will take its responsibility, as it has taken in the past, seriously and continue to strengthen the ministry of the Church, keeping in mind the ever-growing and demanding expectation of member churches, belonging to CBCNEI for highly qualified pastors, church leaders and theological educators. The same may be partially true with the newly developed post-graduate centre at Clark Theological College, in Mokokchung, which is struggling to sustain, and introduce, higher theological studies at their centre. It should not be taken otherwise, by my friends elsewhere, if I express some kind of satisfaction in taking note of the reasonable and well thought-of development programme for higher theological education at Aizawl Theological College. This development may be a good example for others to emulate in their own regions and centres.

There is a proposal, on the part of Eastern Theological College, Jorhat, and John Robert's Theological Seminary, Shillong to form a federated faculty. Much ground work needs to be done before some concrete structure emerges out of consultations at various levels. We can look forward, with much hope and expectation, from such a venture in the North-east.

Let us take a cursory glance over the MTh programmes in the North-east.

Following courses are being offered at MTh level in the colleges in the North-east:

Eastern Theological College, Jorhat	CT, CM (Coun, Ch Ed), HC
Clark Theological College, Mokokchung	CM (Gen), CT
Aizawl Theological College, Aizawl	NT, CT, HC, Miss

Last year, I presented a picture of MTh study programmes under Serampore in the last decade to the Academic Council. One can have a look at it which is provided as an appendix to this paper. A cursory analysis may help to develop our rationale for higher education in the north-east:

Analysis:

1. There are now 10 colleges offering MTh courses in 2010 under Serampore System; there were 7 in 2000.

2. Five year progression in registration for MTh studies in different colleges may be enlightening:

College	St-Branches in 2000	St. reg.01-05	Br.	St. reg.06-11	Br.
ATC (2002)	nil	10	1	49	4
CTC (2007)	nil	-	-	12	1
ETC	7/2	21	1-2	40	1-4
FTS	Nil	12	1-2	11	2
FFRRC	7/3	58	4-6	87	5-6
GLTC	17/9	101	9	56	9
NIPGTS	8/4	46	4	40	3
TTS	9/5	42	5-3	91	5-7
UTC	26/9	97	6-7	113	7-5
UBS	5/2	18	1	71	1-4

3. Registration in 2010-11 is revealing:

There are 6 colleges offering OT with 14 students, making about 2 students per college;
 Seven colleges offering NT with 19 students; 2.5 students per college;
 Seven colleges offering CT with 28 students; 4 students per college;
 Seven colleges offering CT with 28 students; 2.5 students per college;
 six colleges offering HC with 20 students; 3 students per college;
 two colleges offering CE with 4 students; 2 students per college;
 two colleges offering Rel with 3 students; 1.5 students per college;
 six colleges offering CM with 30 students; 5 students per college;
 one colleges offering SA with 6 students; 6 students per college;
 4 colleges offering Miss with 8 students; 2 students per college;
 three colleges offering Comm with 8 students; 2.5 students per college;
 one colleges offering WS with 2 students; 2 students per college;

4. In most of the major branches, there is hardly registration of more than 3 students per branch in an MTh college.

5. Exceptions are in Christian ministry, which has recorded highest number of students.

6. Most popular subjects out of 11 branches offered at MTh level in last 10 years are:

i. CT 189	ii. CM 166	iii. NT 155
iv. HC 144	v. Comm 87	vi. OT 87
vii. Miss 54	viii. Rel 46	ix. CE 35
x. SA 40	xi. WS 24	

7. Among the Biblical fields, NT has more experts than OT;
 NT is offered in seven colleges; OT in sx.

8. CT has maximum number of specialists, and is taught in seven colleges.
9. CM ministry is also popular, and is offered in 6 colleges.
10. Comm, though offered only in three colleges has rolled out 87 graduates.
11. Among so called new fields, known for more than 10 years- SA, Miss, WS and Comm, it is the last which has established itself, followed by Miss, SA and WS.
12. Colleges have reported that 186 staff has doctorate degree.

It was clear from the statistics we have collected that Biblical field, especially Old Testament, needs special attention, therefore strengthening of staff and intake of students in these fields require serious consideration; that cases of Missiology/Communication/Christian Ethics and partly Religion is enlightening, as only 2-3 colleges are offering this course which have credited with 47 students; that Religion is the field in which more staff is needed; and that Colleges offering MTh, or planning for them, should keep in mind the need, proper use of human and library resources and regional interest in mind.

In planning for PG programme in North-eastern centres these statistics and comments may be helpful. I am not presenting the case for doctoral studies, but do wish to point out that more than 50% of those now pursuing DTh studies are students from North-east. This is very encouraging and commendable situation.

Observations and Comments: Implication for higher theological education in the North-east

Let me offer a few observations and comments which may be helpful in planning for higher theological studies in the North-east.

1. Most of the theological institutions are run and supported by the churches in the North-east. One need not be apologetic about denominational and ethnic association of our theological institutions in the North-east; and we, in Serampore, should have to learn to respect and accept such a unique, but not so unique, phenomena in this region. Serampore should not hesitate to affiliate such institutions in the north-east, in order to strengthen theological education, and provide credibility and acceptance to them. At the same time, it should help encourage spirit of accommodation, cooperation and ecumenism as much as possible.
2. It is quite evident, from the statistics available, that there is a genuine interest in the church and society in the North-east for theological education. The fact is brought forth from the ever increase in number of the students, registered for the various courses under Serampore College (University). More than 40% of total number of graduating students, as well as registering students in PG courses, belongs to North-east India. Obvious implication of such a situation demands that
 - a. there is a dire need for higher theological education which should be available in the region itself.
 - b. existing colleges need to provide more seats to students which can only be done by extending infra-structure.
 - c. As 10:1 student-teacher ratio has to be maintained, more teachers are needed. It can be a very strong rationale for the need of higher theological education in the region.
3. In the context of our discussion, we can not avoid a very sensitive issue. It is the issue of affiliation of more theological colleges in the region. There has been some kind of pressure from the already affiliated institutions in the region not to think over the issue. I, however, am inclined to think that Serampore should be more considerate to the request of the genuine needs of long existing non-affiliated institutions in the region. I have Nagaland in mind where many theological institutions are functioning without Serampore affiliation, though they are recognized, and are also aided, by the State Government.
4. There is a new phenomena glaring at the churches in the north-east: Church related/sponsored theological institutions are now producing more theological graduates than the required need of the churches in the region. The surplus students do not have anything but to wait for their appointment some times in future, or seek employment elsewhere. Some do go out of the region for higher education. The same can be now provided in the region itself with extra professional provision.

Christian Theology	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Hist. of Christianity	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Religion	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Christian Ministry	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	3	3	3	3
Social Analysis	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Missiology	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Communication	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Women's Studies	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

3. Eastern Theological College, Jorhat

Branches	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Old Testament	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
New Testament	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	4	x	x	x
Christian Theology	4	x	2	x	x	x	x	4	5	4	3
Hist. of Christianity	3	4	4	3	4	4	x	x	4	Not Allowed	NA
Religion	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Christian Ministry	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	5	7	4
Social Analysis	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Missiology	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Communication	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Women's Studies	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

4. Faith Theological Seminary, Manakala

Branches	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Old Testament	x	x	1	2	2	x	x	1	x	x	1
New Testament	x	2	1	2	1	2	x	x	2	3	2
Christian Theology	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	2
Hist. of Christianity	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Religion	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Christian Ministry	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Social Analysis	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Missiology	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Communication	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Women's Studies	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	

5. FFRRC, Kerala

Branches	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Old Testament	x	2	1	x	x	3	3	x	x	x	1

