

North East Adventist University

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North East Adventist University (NEAU, formerly known as Assam Training School, Adventist Training School, Adventist Higher Secondary School, and Northeast Adventist College) is located at Khliehtyrshi village, about four miles from Jowai town and 34 miles from Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, in northeast India.

Early Adventist Work in Shillong

F. O. Raymond's visit to Shillong in 1913 to sell Adventist publications marked the first known visit by a Seventh-day Adventist.¹ E. H. Guilliard and his family were the first regular missionaries to work among the Khasi tribe when they arrived in 1922.² Soon, E. G. Hardinge, G. G. Lowry, W. A. Barlow, Luther J. Burgess, C. Larsen, O. W. Lange, J. F. Ashlock, and others consolidated the outreach. Their efforts led to the baptism of the first foreign converts in 1920 and the first native convert four years later.³ After additional baptisms, the missionaries organized the Shillong Church June 4, 1938, with 25 members. It was the first Adventist congregation in the region.⁴ The church building was dedicated on March 1, 1941.⁵ Shillong served as the mission base as foreign missionaries and local mission staff spread Adventism to other parts of Meghalaya and the states of Mizoram and Manipur.

The Need for a Training School

With no Adventist school in the region, Adventist children had to attend other schools where schoolmates taunted them for their Sabbath observance and other beliefs. In 1938, in answer to the plight of Adventist children J. F. Ashlock and his wife started a small church school in Shillong with a single classroom. It offered up to the fifth standard, instructing younger children in the morning and the older ones in the afternoon.⁶

Adventist youth beyond the fifth standard had only two choices for their higher education, either Spicer College in Poona, more than 1,500 miles away, or Meiktila Training School in Burma. In 1938, two young Adventists from the region went to Spicer College. However, other church leaders felt that Meiktila would be a better fit because of the affinity in race and language between the Burmese and Khasi people. As a result, in 1938, six Adventists attended the training school in Burma.⁷ By 1940, the number of students from Assam increased to 14.

The distance, time, and cost of sending Adventist youth to Burma or Poona became causes of concern for Adventists in Assam. Besides, Adventist youth continued to encounter difficulty in Sabbath observance in other higher institutions. Thus, the church leadership felt an urgent need to establish a training school in the region. E. G. Hardinge, J. F. Ashlock, and O. W. Lange were among the first to recognize the necessity for such a school⁸ Before the Hardinges retired and left Shillong in 1933, they donated a portion of the proceeds from the sale of their home in Shillong toward the construction of the mission school.⁹

Founding of Assam Training School

After the church leadership decided to open a training school for Adventist youth in Assam, a team of church leaders from the Southern Asia Division, Northeast India Union, and Assam Mission comprising F. H. Loasby, J. M. Steeves, E. W. Pohlman, J. F. Ashlock, and others went on a three-day tour of several sites in Meghalaya. They nearly purchased an open hillside near Barapani Lake (Umiam) about 12 miles from Shillong. However, the district commissioner rejected their request, pointing out that a dangerous type of malaria in the area had claimed the lives of a missionary family. He instead suggested they establish their school near Jowai and sent a man to help them locate a site. They looked for land as far as 30 miles beyond Jowai before settling on a 400-acre pine-wooded property at Khliehtyrshi village just four miles from Jowai town.¹⁰ At that time, "there were many who shook their heads in dismay." Such reactions were understandable due to the fact that no roads passable for vehicles led to Jowai. Students had to walk several miles from their villages to attend the school.¹¹ Today, the national highway passes right in front of the institution, making it easily accessible.

Sir Robert Reid, the Governor of Assam, and Lady Reid laid the foundation stone for the administration building on February 2, 1942.¹² Funds for construction came from the division, union, and the local mission. The division granted a special gift of 2,000 rupees from the emergency fund along with an appropriation of 20,000 rupees.¹³ The school buildings were based on the blueprints Lange had drawn up during his illness from typhus fever.

While construction continued at Khliehtyrshi, the school started its classes in 1941 at Mynthong in Jowai in rented quarters with 33 students and five teachers. W. F. Storz points out that it was then called Assam Co-educational High School and opened in the month of April.¹⁴ However, it appears that it was a temporary name as the school eventually came to be known as Assam Training School (ATS). Three students from the Lushai Hills (Mizoram), as well as former students of Meiktila Training School, joined the school along with Adventists from Shillong, Mawkaiaw, and other places. O. W. Lange, the first principal, served two terms (1941-1942 and 1943-1948). In 1942, the school opened at its permanent site although the buildings were not yet finished. Classes and construction continued simultaneously.¹⁵

The completion of the school plant took place under difficult circumstances. Building materials had to be transported from Shillong and other places on human backs or on ponies. It also coincided with the Second World War which made the procurement of supplies even more difficult. The buildings were largely wood and

corrugated iron structures. They had thatch roofs, later replaced by tin purchased from Calcutta.¹⁶ It took six years to complete an administration building, a girls' dormitory, a boys' dormitory, a kitchen with dining room, five teachers' quarters, a principal's bungalow, living quarters for farm assistants, servants' quarters, and a barn.¹⁷

Years later during a visit, Lange observed, "As we look around the school plant today, it is hard to realize or remember the struggles and the sacrifices that have gone to make the school possible. The obstacles in securing building materials at this place and in these times seemed insurmountable at times, but the hand of the Great Master steadily opened the way enabling the work to go forward."¹⁸ During those pioneering years the school occasionally ran out of food supplies. However, Lange pointed out that "God in His providence always provided in time."¹⁹

ATS, as it came to be fondly called and remembered to this day, began primarily for the training of Adventist youth for mission work in the region. It was to serve the people of Assam which comprised the current seven northeast states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura.

High School to Higher Secondary School

From its inception until 1997, ATS offered only up to the tenth standard. In those 50 plus years, those who desired to pursue higher education, especially theological training, attended Spicer Memorial College before returning to their home mission field for denominational service. That scenario has not changed for some Adventist youth, especially those interested in theological studies, since North East Adventist University does not offer seminary training.

As a Seventh-day Adventist training school, the institution had a strong and vibrant industrial program. C. S. Booth, the sub-divisional officer of Jowai, visited ATS in April 1946. Booth was particularly impressed with the school's excellent practical education. He also pointed out that no other school in the northeast hills provided such training.²⁰ ATS received further publicity during the Second World War when it administered medical aid to two pilots of a R. A. F. bomber that made an emergency landing near the school campus.²¹

Right from the very beginning, ATS was a mission-oriented institution. In the 1940s, students in the ninth and tenth standards received teacher training instruction which included a course on homiletics.²² Principal Lange stressed that it was the desire of every teacher to make ATS like the schools of the prophets and to prepare workers for the mission field in harmony with the plan laid out in the writings of Ellen G. White.²³ Both teachers and students engaged in different evangelistic activities throughout the year.

Literature evangelism became one of the most effective ways of winning converts. Each year, a number of students participated in it after receiving training at the colporteur institute held at the school, Calcutta, or other places. In those early years, several Lushai students of ATS sold the Lushai edition of *Christian Doctrines* and *Signs of the Times* in the Lushai Hills. As a result, many were baptized and several churches organized.²⁴ Thus,

ATS served as a launching pad for pioneer Adventist evangelism in many parts of northeast India. For a number of years, the school operated a Bible correspondence program. It finally turned the program over to the Voice of Prophecy when it became difficult for the students and teachers to maintain it.²⁵

When Meghalaya attained statehood in 1972, administration renamed the Assam Training School as the Adventist Training School. The school crossed several significant milestones in the late 1990s under the visionary leadership of Principal Biakzidinga Renthlei. Upgraded to a higher secondary school in 1997, it became briefly known as Adventist Higher Secondary School. According to Renthlei, the decision to advance the school to a secondary level occurred during the tenure of his predecessor, H. Nongkhlaw, because of persistent pleas from Adventist parents across the northeast region of India, particularly Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland.²⁶ It actually became a reality during Renthlei's principalship. Since the upgrade, students have been sitting for the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) and Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate (HSSLC) exams under the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE). The higher secondary section offers three streams (arts, commerce, and science).

The school also offered students the opportunity to write division-instituted exams such as the Division School Leaving Certificate (DSLCL) for class X and the Division College Eligibility Certificate (DCEC) for class XII conducted by the education department of the Southern Asia Division. Students who passed those exams were eligible for admission to the autonomous programs at Spicer Memorial College.

Student enrollment generally increased through the years despite occasional declines. In 1947, for example, the school had 178 students. However, in the following year, it could only admit 101 students due to difficulty in getting food supplies as a result of the Second World War.²⁷ In the 1990s it had less than 500 students. Because of the poor enrollment, the school could not achieve financial self-sufficiency and often struggled to pay staff salaries, particularly during the winter season. The first two decades of the twenty-first century, however, have seen significant increases in enrollment. At its peak, the non-collegiate level alone had more than 1,000 pupils. That provided sufficient funds to support the operation of the college programs, especially during their initial stage when the college enrollment did not make financial self-sufficiency possible.

Students come from different tribes and communities throughout northeast India. The majority of them are Khasis, Pnars, Mizos, and Nagas. Other tribal representations include the Garos, the Meeteis, the Kukis, the Assamese, and others. The campus provides boarding facilities for hundreds of students, both girls and boys. The various tribes and communities create a warm and vibrant atmosphere in the institution. They also offer opportunities for students to learn and appreciate the culture and customs of other peoples. Thus, it teaches them to live in harmony with each other.

As Northeast Adventist College (1999-2020)

In 1999, the church upgraded Adventist Higher Secondary School into a college that became known as Northeast Adventist College (NAC), the lone Adventist college in the entire Northeast India Union territory until Helen Lowry Secondary School in Mizoram also advanced to the college level in 2017. Biakzidinga Renthlei would serve as NAC's first president. It was also during his dedicated and single-minded leadership that student enrollment had decent increases although still short of financial self-sufficiency. Besides, the institution expanded its infrastructure by adding a new hostel for the girls, one for younger boys, a second floor for older boys, a community center, a library, and additional classrooms. The increase in enrollment enabled the institution to purchase several vehicles.²⁸ During a period of more than two decades (1999-2020), the college remained affiliated with North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), the state university located in Shillong and operated by the government of Meghalaya.

NAC offered Bachelor of Arts degrees in six areas, namely English, political science, history, sociology, education, and economics. In its first year as a college it had 10 students, four male and six female. The institution experienced modest enrollment increases through the years. In 2003, the number of students crossed 100. In the next 10 years, enrollment averaged at 146. In 2015, the college hit a new milestone when the number of students crossed the 200 mark. Then during the next five years, the average each year remained in the 190s.²⁹ Despite the modest student body, the college continues to make a mark in producing students who secure excellent results in NEHU exams.

As North East Adventist University

In 2019, Northeast Adventist College turned another page in its history when the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly passed the North East Adventist University Act of 2015, thereby giving the institution the green light to become a private Christian university. It finally occurred in 2020 when the Governor of Meghalaya officially authorized the establishment of North East Adventist University. Church leadership appointed Dr. Eliah David Srikakolli as its first chancellor and Dr. Paul Bhaggien as the first vice-chancellor. NEAU currently operates under the administration and financial sponsorship of the Medical Educational Trust Association Surat of Seventh-day Adventists (METAS).³⁰

North East Adventist University has received government permission to offer academic degrees in the fields of physical sciences, applied sciences, life sciences, health science, social science, bio-technology, information technology, engineering, management, commerce, communication, law, humanities, languages, performing arts, and other allied areas.³¹ As NEAU enters its first academic year as a private university, it is optimistic that it will continue to remain as a center of education for the youth of northeast India. When the institution was affiliated to NEHU, students encountered Sabbath issues when some of their exams were scheduled on the Sabbath. As a private Christian university, its students no longer have any Sabbath challenges. That should open more educational opportunities to Adventist youth both from the region and from other parts of the country.

Impact of the Institution

Many local youth unable to attend Spicer Adventist University or other colleges far away from their home whether because of financial difficulty or otherwise, can now receive their graduate degrees from NEAU. It serves both the church and the wider community in northeast India in providing a holistic education. The people of Khliehtyrshi, its surrounding areas, and all the northeastern states, have greatly benefitted from the Adventist education the institution has provided for decades. Alumni members of the institution have also served in various roles beyond the Northeast India Union territory. Many are currently working in the United States, Canada, England, Europe, Thailand, Philippines, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and many other parts of the world.

The spiritual, economic, and social impact of NEAU on the students, the church, community, nation, or the world has not been researched. However, those closely associated with the institution either as students, staff, or faculty cannot deny the positive impact it has on their own lives and those of others. The spiritual lives of many have changed for the better which in turn have positively impacted their economic and social lives as well. Many students may not have joined Adventism. Yet, NEAU has positively affected their lives in so many ways.

NEAU and the Adventist Church Mission

The primary purpose of Northeast Adventist University at the time of its establishment in 1941 was to prepare Adventist youth for mission work. A glance into its history, especially during the missionary years, indicates that it fulfilled that distinct purpose. A large number of its alumni have entered denominational employment in various mission fields in the Northeast India Union. Many of them have served the institution itself as staff, teachers, and administrators. Stories of their distinct qualifications, faithfulness, commitment, and dedication to the service of the church are widespread.

During the twentieth century, Adventists established a unique brand of schools. They called them Adventist training schools to stress the industrial and missionary education students received. In order to achieve this objective, students received training both in and outside the classroom. The school required them to participate in various industrial programs such as carpentry, sewing, agriculture, gardening, dairy farm, poultry, electricity, printing, cooking, baking, and several other useful labors. Students learned to appreciate the dignity of manual labor. Such training helped them to become well-balanced individuals as described in the Adventist philosophy of education.³² ATS served as a mission center especially during its first several decades as it tried to establish its roots in the region. NEAU continues to fulfill the church's mission by providing an Adventist education to Adventists and non-Adventists.

Principals/Presidents

Assam Training School (1941-1971)

O. W. Lange (1941-1942); C. Jensen (1942-1943); O. W. Lange (1943-1948); D. S. Laursen (1948-1949); Albert Schimke (1949-1951); I. R. Thomas (1951-1952); W. C. Rick (1952-1953); B. J. Williams (1953-1955); H. D. Erickson (1955-1959); F. H. Nash (1959-1967); C. A. Boykin (1967-1969); D. R. Bankhead (1970-1973)

Adventist Training School (1972-1997)

D. R. Bankhead (1970-1973); J. I. Khonghat (1973-1974); D. S. Poddar (1974-1975); L. K. Neitham (1976-1977); B. Luikham (1978-1980); D. Nongtdu (1980-1983); H. Dkhar (1984-1985); L. Colney (1986-1988); D. R. Sangma (1989-1993); K. Dkhar (1994-1995); W. Ralte (Interim, 1995-1996); H. Nongkhlaw (1996-1997)

Adventist Higher Secondary School (1997-1999)

B. Renthlei (1997-1999)

Northeast Adventist College (1999-2020)

B. Renthlei (1999-2004); Lamm B. Fanwar (2004-2007); Berun R. Sangma (2007-2010); C. Lalthanzika (2010-2011); B. Renthlei (2011-2015); Lamm B. Fanwar (2015-2020)

North East Adventist University (2021-)

Paul Bhaggien (2021-)

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Guild, Cecil B. "Langes Round Out Fruitful Mission." *Southern Asia Tidings*, June 1973.

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NOTES

1. F. O. Raymond, "Shillong," *Eastern Tidings*, April 1913, 11.
2. E. H. Guilliard, "Shillong," *Eastern Tidings*, July 15, 1922, 5, 6.
3. "News Notes," *Eastern Tidings*, September 1, 1924, 3.
4. F. H. Loasby, "Northeast Notes," *Eastern Tidings*, November 1, 1939, 6, 7; J. F. Ashlock, "Assam Notes," *Eastern Tidings*, September 1, 1938, 7, 8.
5. O. W. Lange, "The Dedication of the Shillong Church," *Eastern Tidings*, May 15, 1941, 4.
6. R. S. Fernando, "From Our Mail Bag," *Eastern Tidings*, October 1, 1940, 6.
7. F. H. Loasby, "Our Work in Shillong," *Eastern Tidings*, July 1, 1938, 8; Ashlock, "Assam Notes," 7, 8.
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11. Gerald J. Christo, "One Hundred Ten Learn Leadercraft," *Southern Asia Tidings*, December 1965, 9.
12. F. H. Loasby, "The Assam Training School," *Eastern Tidings*, April 15, 1942, 5, 6.
13. Guild, "Langes Round Out Fruitful Mission," 10.
14. W. F. Storz, "The Rains Came Down and the Floods Came Up," *Southern Asia Tidings*, June 1967, 3.
15. R. B. Thurber, "Circuit-Riding in the Northeast—II," *Eastern Tidings*, January 1, 1942, 4; Khrawbor Kharbteng, "Church Growth in Khasi-Jaintia Conference, Meghalaya, India" (D.Min. diss., Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, 2001), 67.
16. C. H. Tidwell, "Assam Laymen Set the Pace," *ARH*, April 3, 1969, 16, 17.
17. O. W. Lange, "Looking Back," *Eastern Tidings*, April 1, 1948, 5. The original dormitories for both boys and girls were torn down some years ago and new ones were constructed.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 6.
20. Lange, "Looking Back," 6.
21. Ibid., 5.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. E. M. Meleen, "More Prospecting in the Lushai Hills, Part I," *Eastern Tidings*, June 1, 1950, 3.
25. Lange, "Looking Back," 6.
26. Biakzidinga Renthlei, former president of Northeast Adventist College, interview by Koberson Langhu, Pune, Maharashtra, India, August 23, 2021.
27. Lal T. Zauve, "Assam Training School News," *Eastern Tidings*, June 1, 1948, 6.
28. Renthlei, August 23, 2021.
29. Andrew Zimik, personal communication to the author, September 26, 2021. Andrew Zimik is currently, the registrar of North East Adventist University.

30. METAS “is a registered company incorporated under the laws of Indian Companies Act 1956” with its head office in Surat, Gujarat. It is a group of institutions that operate educational and medical facilities in several parts of India. METAS has certain autonomy in its administration and function but operates under the guidelines and policies of the Southern Asia Division of Seventh-day Adventists.
31. For further information, visit the university's website, <https://www.neauniversity.in>.
32. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 1952), 13.
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