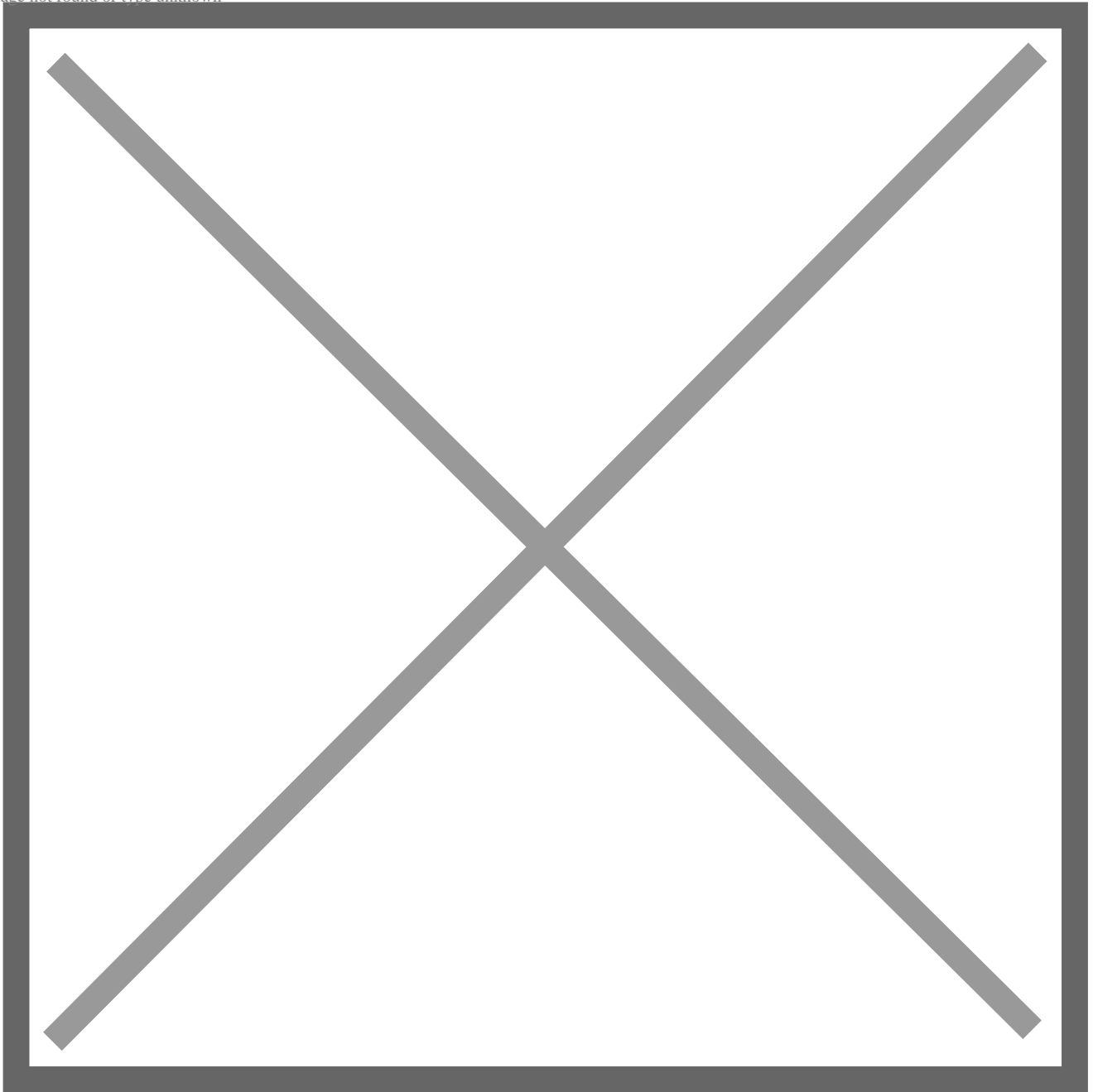


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Adventism and Ethnic Diversity in Southern Asia Division

SANTOSH KUMAR

Santosh Kumar

India is a diverse land with a population of approximately 1.3 billion,¹ placing India at the second position in the world

in terms of population. Among these, Seventh-day Adventists' existence, as per the statistics of 2019, is 1.14 million.² India is a richly diverse community, including a diverse range of ethnic groups, each, not just different, but on occasion quite the opposite. The present population of the country can be divided among four racial groups: Negritos, proto-Australoid, the Mongoloids, and the Mediterranean.³⁴ These racial groups today majorly fall in different ethnic groups based on their linguistic classifications. They are Indo-Aryan (78.05 percent), Dravidian (19.64 percent), and the remaining 2.31 percent of the population segregated among Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer), Sino-Tibetan, and Tai-Kadai.⁵ This ethnic diversity can be easily seen within the Adventist church too.

Adventism in Diverse Community

The early arrival of the Seventh-day Adventist mission in India goes back to 1895.⁶ The headquarters of the Adventist Church in Calcutta (Kolkata) opened its first center at Karmatar, in the district of Santal Parganas, about one hundred sixty-eight miles north of Kolkata in 1898.⁷ Soon after, the orphanage was discontinued due to an epidemic outbreak of smallpox, resulting in the deaths of Dores Alanzo Robinson and Frederick W. Brown.⁸ Despite the loss of early missionaries, the mission continued to expand.

In Eastern India the second Adventist station was opened at Simultala, about sixty miles away from Karmatar in 1900. An industrial school was opened here for the Santali people.⁹ As a result, in 1904 three Santali converted and were baptized.¹⁰ During this decade several other mission stations were established, and as a result, in 1909, the first meeting of Bengali members was held at Gopalganj.¹¹ Meanwhile in Lucknow, the Burgesses were involved in printing literature in the vernacular.¹²

In western India George F. Enoch was sent to Bombay (Mumbai) in 1906, replacing C. A. Hansen. He learned the Marathi language and translated *Steps to Christ* in the vernacular and in 1913 several books of the Bible.¹³

Southern India grew after a few merchants, who were Sabbath keepers,¹⁴ had met with an Adventist evangelist in Colombo, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), invited Adventist ministers in 1904. Later a school was opened, and the work increased rapidly as young people were trained to help in the evangelistic work. As a result, in 1910, 20 men and women were baptized.¹⁵

The work in the northwest of India expanded with the missionary work of L. J. Burgess and his wife in 1906. Their primary work was in the Hindi language in Almora district. They translated Adventist tracts in Hindi and Urdu, respectively. Several properties were purchased, including in the city of Lucknow, where the printing house was set up, and the mission headquarters.¹⁶

Approach to a Diverse Church Community

The involvement of the Adventist mission in India encountered a range of several ethnic groups that were initially a challenge. However, with time the church learned to develop, address, and reach out to many ethnic groups. The Southern Asia Division of Seventh-day Adventists (SUD) functions in India and neighboring countries like Nepal and Bhutan.¹⁷ Alone, India has more than two thousand ethnic groups.¹⁸ Nepal has about one hundred twenty-six castes and ethnic groups with about one hundred twenty-three linguistics.¹⁹ Bhutan consists of a few ethnic groups, *Sharchop* being the largest.²⁰

The mission work in SUD was nurtured and missiologically structured to present the Adventist message significantly in the context. One of the first things that the early missionaries felt as the community's need was to present the gospel in the vernacular languages.^{21 22} At first the early missionaries focused mostly on those who could understand the messages in the English language. A story is told by the first Adventist convert, Korada, who happened to get an opportunity to attend one of the meetings on prophecies by D. A. Robinson. Korada and eight others could attend the meetings later only when they were accompanied by a European lady who could translate for them. The incident must not be understood as the intention of excluding the natives or prioritizing the English language; perhaps the unpreparedness of the early missionaries was the reason.²³ Georgia Burgess expressed that the need of learning the vernacular is crucial to deliver the Adventist messages to the natives. She expressed that natives must receive the message in their own understandings, and therefore, a learning of the language and printing works in the vernacular is essential.²⁴

The need for translated work was addressed, and several translated works of Ellen G. White was published; primarily, "Steps to Christ" and "the Great Controversy."^{25 26} The Oriental Watchman Publishing House was established to fulfill and enhance the purpose of expanding the Adventist mission through literature in 1924. Ever since, the house prints literature in 17 languages and many more in process.

Apart from literature, SUD has involved in developing several means to reach the diverse community. Several medical and educational institutions were established to reach out to the diverse ethnic community by meeting their needs; understanding their culture, worldviews; and linguistic structure to present the gospel in a meaningful manner.

Such is the community of Spicer Adventist University (SAU), which has been a center of influence for the community providing cultural freedom, respecting religious sentiments, and providing religious space for every religious and ethnic background to be nurtured and have the feeling of acceptance. Spicer University welcomes knowledge seekers from every part of the country and by far, students from almost all ethnic groups in India has joined Spicer for higher education. By welcoming and entertaining a diverse community in campus, several programs at Spicer is

encouraged to balance the “unity in diversity” approach. There are vernacular prayer groups arranged for students to worship on Sabbath in their own languages to worship right after the united worship in the main church, both on Friday night and Saturday afternoon. There are the annual “Cultural Emphasis Day” and the “Annual Food Fair Day” to appreciate and acknowledge the rich diversity of India at SAU. In this manner, SAU not only provides education in a Christian setup but also provides and utilizes the opportunity of reaching out the other religious backgrounds by acceptance, compassion, and love.

Apart from educational ministry, SUD is committed to move with the fastest medium to reach the entire country—Media Ministry. To fulfill this task, Hope TV India was established in India that offers programs on healthy lifestyle, relationships, community, faith, and holistic Christian living. Started in the year 2010, Hope TV India officially broadcasts in five main languages of the country—Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. The studios are stationed in Chennai (South), SAU campus (West), and the third is proposed to be established in Hapur (North). The Hope TV media ministry intends to enhance their impact to many other regional languages in the future.²⁷

Unity in diversity is a unique quality that the church upholds, recognizing different values and contributions, and, if diversity is neglected, the functioning of the church to perform tasks would be limited.²⁸ Adventism in the Southern Asia Division is conscious that a single approach to nurturing the believer body of different ethnicity would not be possible. Therefore a critically contextualized and unique approach is used to address believers among the diverse ethnic communities.

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