

The Suffering Church: Meitei Believers

Jim Elliff

As I spoke by interpreter to the Meitei pastors and church planters in Bangladesh, I knew that I was training a special group of conscientious leaders. We met in a small mud chapel beside a devoted pastor's home who had just died unexpectedly. They listened intently as we talked over church issues that are found in the New Testament. These are some of the first believers among the Meitei.



The Meitei are Manipurian speakers (or Meitei-lon, the more recent official term). Most are from the southeastern Himalayan state of Manipur in India, but these leaders came from villages in eastern Bangladesh where about 50,000 of the Meitei live, the beautiful rural tea garden region of that impoverished country. The Meitei consist of only one class, corresponding to India's "untouchables," and are largely farmers.

Evangelical Christianity is almost unheard of among the Meitei, so these men are facing huge obstacles, even though the Meitei are somewhat disenchanted with their Hindu practices. And they are persecuted. I was told that meetings to discuss the intrusion of Christians had been held in all the villages where house churches have been started. Christians have been shunned by their communities, threatened with bodily harm, and worse. One leader spoke of having to provide the normal wedding activities for a new Christian couple because Hindu parents had rejected them. Another young believer was beaten for his evangelism when taken to the headman of the village. There have been several such incidents. But the believers remain happy, demonstrating that Christ satisfies even during difficult times. Some have had to leave their villages because of the pressure, but they have been received by other believers.

One man's eyes caught mine following one of the meetings. He was an older man, a leader whose face shone though it was wrinkled with time and the sun. He had suffered rejection by his community, as had the others. But his suffering had a special emotion. His wife had died and he asked the community leaders for some land to bury her. Hindus cremate and do not bury, which is a distinctly Christian practice. Time was of the essence, since they have no embalming procedures. With no place for her, the man decided to bury his wife on his own little plot of land beside his home. Within a few days, the Hindus dug up her body during the night, and left her on his doorstep. With fresh tears, he buried her again.

I must admit that this experience has haunted me. What if this had been my dilemma, my wife, my community? Although the conflict is currently bearable and progress is being made as new churches are being established, for any one believer being ostracized, the social pain and even fear can be intense. But God remains the believer's secure and loving friend, and believers find comfort in each other even when the world around them rejects them.

Those men on the mats in the mud chapel are heroes to me. Simple, eager, largely untrained yet spiritually hungry, they are the promise for the Meitei people's future. Please pray for them and for the spreading of house churches throughout their part of the world. And remember that there are men and women like them around the world who are suffering for Christ of whom the world is not worthy.

Jim Elliff was asked by HeartCry Missionary Society to train pastors and church planters in Bangladesh and in India, along with John Baker and Corey Huddleston in October, 2009.

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