

Spiritually Empowered Yet Socially Disenfranchised: The Stigmatization of Pentecostals in Mizo Christianity

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Mizoram, the southernmost state of Northeast India sandwiched between Bangladesh and Myanmar, witnessed various Christian revival movements from 1906 onwards. Added to the mix sometime in the 1930s was a distinctive Pentecostal revivalism. Due to various quirks of fate, it was Oneness Pentecostalism, especially the United Pentecostal Church–Northeast India (UPC-NEI), which eventually became the most prominent face of Pentecostalism. The church ultimately split into two—the UPC-NEI and United Pentecostal Church of Mizoram—over leadership issues in the 1990s. The UPC-NEI was the second largest Christian denomination before the split, and even today, the two factions continue to be among the top five denominations/churches in terms of membership. However, members of both churches can attest to a long history of stigmatization and marginalization from the mainstream of society, especially at the hands of the Presbyterians and the Baptists.

The paper posits that such a practice of stigmatization continues to undermine the missional commitment and activities of the ‘mainline’ Mizo churches. It seeks to explore the various dimensions of the stigmatization of Pentecostals within the larger framework of Mizo Christianity. By way of throwing more light on the issue, it seeks to shed light on the “spiritual elitism” that permeated and continues to define Mizo Christianity as well as the ‘Christian’ Mizo society. This, it is envisioned, will help shed light on the gradual stratification of society along denominational lines in a traditional egalitarian tribal society, and the challenge it poses to the life and witness of the Mizo Church.