

Picturing Pioneers in India

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Meeting pioneer members of the Church in India has changed the way I picture pioneers.

“Whenever I think about pioneers,” as the Primary song goes, “I think of brave women and men.”¹

Stories of Latter-day Saint pioneers who blazed trails of faith have always inspired me. As a young mother, the stories of pioneer women reminded me of my latter-day blessings. I could give birth in a hospital rather than a handcart!

The definition of a pioneer as “one who goes before to prepare or open up the way

for others to follow”² describes Latter-day Saint pioneers on wagon and handcart trails gathering to Zion. But it also describes modern pioneers and the trails of faith they forge all over the world.

When my five children were all enrolled in school, I began graduate studies in religious history. I chose to research The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in India as the topic for my PhD dissertation. My research in India has changed the way I picture pioneers.



A mission was established in Bangalore in 1993, and a temple will soon be built here.

Pillars of the Church

Years earlier, as a young college student in 1986, I had traveled to South Asia with the Brigham Young University Young Ambassadors. It was a life-changing experience that included spending a day in Calcutta (now called Kolkata) with Mother Teresa. It was equally exciting to meet Latter-day Saints who were modern-day pioneers in India and Sri Lanka.

One of these members was Raj Kumar, who found the Church when he attended a performance of the BYU Young Ambassadors in 1982. When we met him, he had recently returned from his mission to Fresno, California, USA. He still wore his missionary name tag and continued to teach anyone in Delhi who would listen. Raj was one of approximately 600 members in India at the time, but to me he seemed like a lone Latter-day Saint in a sea of hundreds of millions of people.



In 1986, I met Raj Kumar after his mission. Still wearing his missionary name tag, he shared the gospel with anyone who would listen.



Siblings Suvarna and Sarala Katuka joined the Church in 1984 and later served missions.

I was inspired by Raj Kumar's example as I chose to serve a mission. Raj also blazed a trail of faith for some of the first native Indian missionaries to serve in the country. Suvarna Katuka and his fellow missionaries had received some missionary training in Chennai. Their mission president, stationed in Singapore, assigned Raj to give them additional training in Delhi.

Suvarna Katuka remembers how their missionary work changed because of Raj Kumar's example and training. They were able to replace feelings of fear with greater faith and courage. Suvarna explained, "That's when I think my real conversion started. I felt the Holy Ghost, and that is when I decided to help build the kingdom here in India."³

Suvarna had joined the Church in Rajahmundry. He, along with five brothers and one sister, was baptized in 1984. On the day of his baptism, Suvarna was ordained a priest and set apart as the second counselor in the branch presidency. He was also promised in a blessing that if he remained faithful, he would be a "pillar of the Church in India."

Suvarna's sister Sarala also served a mission. Before she left, she introduced the gospel to her friend Swarupa. When Suvarna returned from his mission, he was blessed by his sister's missionary work and married Swarupa. That small branch in Rajahmundry has now become



Elders Kandavalli, Sharma, Katuka, and Raju.



The family of Elsie and Edwin Dharmaraju on the day they were baptized.

The devoted service of many Church members in India has truly made them pillars of the Church.

a stake. Many returned missionaries from Rajahmundry have become leaders within the Church throughout India.

I met the children of Suvarna and Swarupa Katuka while teaching at BYU in 2014. Josh Katuka had recently finished serving a mission in Bangalore, India, and his sister Timnah had just received her call to the same mission. When I asked Timnah and Josh if they knew Raj Kumar, they said, “Yes, he’s our uncle!” Raj Kumar had married Sarala.

I am grateful to the Katukas for introducing me to several other pioneers as they helped me travel in India. Many of them trace their pioneer trail back to the love and example of the Katuka family. At one point, Suvarna and Swarupa had the opportunity to emigrate to Canada. But they turned it down because they felt that the Lord needed them to stay in India and build the kingdom of God there. Their devoted service has truly made them pillars of the Church.

Pioneer Members in Bengaluru and Hyderabad

During the last half of the 20th century, the Church has been established in diverse cities in India through pioneer members.⁴ Each story witnesses how the Lord has been leading people to the restored gospel.

Michael Anthoney, a pioneer member in Bangalore (now Bengaluru), miraculously connected with a Church member in 1970. When Delwin Pond, a bishop in Utah, went to a chiropractor because of back pain, he saw a magazine article at the chiropractor’s office for a nonprofit organization that sponsored students in India. He felt a strong prompting to support one of these students. This led to a 10-year anonymous correspondence that culminated in the Ponds making contact with Michael and sharing the gospel with him. Michael was baptized in 1981 and served a mission in Salt Lake City in 1982. He returned



Delwin Pond (center) introduced Michael Anthony to the Church in 1981.



Hyderabad, a city of over eight million people and home to the first stake in India.

to India early because his mother was critically ill, so he served the final three months of his mission in Bangalore, where he taught several of his friends and others who became members of the first branch there.⁵ Now plans are underway to build a temple in Bengaluru.

Elsie and Edwin Dharmaraju joined the Church in Samoa and were called by President Spencer W. Kimball to return back to their home in Hyderabad as missionaries to their family. In 1978, 22 of Elsie and Edwin's family members were baptized, and from this beginning the first stake in the country was organized in Hyderabad in 2012.⁶

The members of the Hyderabad Stake today picture themselves as latter-day pioneers. Their stake Pioneer Day celebrations have commemorated the trek of the early pioneers as well as modern pioneer journeys. Their celebrations have included square dancing, commemorative hikes, and even handcart rides.

In their 2014 Pioneer Day celebration, they placed blocks of ice in a row behind the

church and invited members to remove their shoes and walk across the ice, thinking about how the early pioneers crossed icy rivers. At the conclusion of their celebration, the members of the Hyderabad stake were encouraged to remember the spirit of early pioneers and that "all of them are pioneers for their families."⁷

They also listened to John Santosh Murala, then serving in the mission presidency, talk about how his aunt Elsie and uncle Edwin Dharmaraju came to Hyderabad to teach their family the gospel. John was the youngest of the 22 pioneer members to be baptized in 1978.

When I visited Hyderabad in 2014, John Murala told me his story and much of the Church history that he has been diligently gathering. He also introduced me to his wife, Annapurna, who told me one of the most powerful Latter-day pioneer stories I have ever heard.



Annapurna and John Murala, who were pioneer members in Hyderabad, are shown here helping with a handcart trek reenactment and on the day they were sealed in the Hong Kong Temple.



Members of the Hyderabad stake commemorate Pioneer Day through song, dance, and even handcart rides.



The stake center of the Hyderabad India Stake, organized in 2012 by President Dallin H. Oaks.

Church members in India picture themselves as pioneers for their families as they persevere in living the gospel.

Annapurna was 12 years old in 1991 when her brother Murthy was taught the gospel by two missionaries in Hyderabad. Annapurna’s parents didn’t allow her to listen to the missionaries or attend church. However, Murthy gave her a Book of Mormon and a constant stream of Church literature for her to read. For seven years, Annapurna studied the gospel on her own and gained a strong testimony of its truth. She dreamed of being baptized, serving a mission, and being married in the temple but did not have permission from her parents.

Annapurna faced a difficult decision in her life when she was introduced to John Murala. John had remained strong in his testimony since his baptism in 1978 and was looking for a member of the Church to marry. After a very brief meeting where Annapurna shared her testimony of the gospel, John was convinced that he had met his future wife. Annapurna

knew that if she married John, she would be able to be baptized and one day be sealed in the temple. However, at about the same time, Annapurna’s parents were planning to arrange a marriage for her.

Annapurna made the difficult decision to leave home and marry John. She felt it was the only way she could join the Church. She said she was “totally heartbroken” to leave her parents. But even today she affirms, “For everybody’s salvation, . . . for my posterity and for my parents and their ancestors, to do their temple work, I had to take that step.”⁸

John and Annapurna are grateful that her parents have now accepted their marriage. Many members in India have made sacrifices, just like the early pioneers, to become members of the Church. Yet these Saints pressed forward with faith because they picture themselves as pioneers and welding links for their



Artist rendering of the Bengaluru India Temple. The site will also include a meetinghouse, a distribution center, Church offices, and housing for temple patrons.

families on both sides of the veil. I cherish the many stories of faith, sacrifice, and courage that I have heard from members blazing trails in new gospel frontiers. I still think about pioneers pulling handcarts and crossing icy rivers, but now I can picture modern pioneers in India and all over the world.

Ultimately, all pioneer trails have been blazed by individuals following in the footsteps of the Savior Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, Christ is called “the pioneer of [our] salvation” (see Hebrews 2:10, New Revised

Standard Version). Jesus Christ has prepared the way for us to return to our heavenly home. True pioneers follow and point us to Christ, who is leading this marvelous work and wonder in the latter-days. ■

NOTES

1. “Whenever I Think about Pioneers,” *Children’s Songbook*, 222–23.
2. *Oxford English Dictionary* (1971), “Pioneer.” See also Thomas S. Monson, “Led by Spiritual Pioneers,” *Ensign*, Aug. 2006, 3.
3. Suvarna Katuka, oral history interview by Taunalyn Rutherford, May 2014, Delhi, India.
4. Many of the pioneer stories from India can be found in the Church History section of the Gospel Library under “Global Histories.”
5. See “A History of the Church in India,” comp. Jerry C. Garlock (unpublished, 1995), 49–50.
6. See “I Will Establish a Church by Your Hand,” history.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
7. See “Hyderabad Stake Pioneer Day Activity,” in ChurchofJesusChrist.org/hyderabad-stake-pioneer-day-activity.
8. Annapurna Guru Murala, oral history interview by Taunalyn Rutherford, Hyderabad, India, May 7, 2014. See also Rochelle Welty and Jan Pinborough, “God Had His Own Plans for Me,” *Ensign*, Apr. 2003, 54–56.