

EDUCATIONAL SCENARIO IN THE EARLY YEARS OF BRITISH RULE IN ASSAM : A STUDY FROM 1826 TO 1901.

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Abstract- The paper is an attempt to provide a glimpse of the educational scenario in the early years of British rule in Assam. Assam had come under British rule in 1826. David Scott a covenanted civil servant was appointed Agent to the Governor General Northeast frontier in 1823 by the British East India Company who ruled over Assam until 1857 and later under the British Crown from November 1858 onwards like other parts of India. While setting up the new administration in Assam, David Scott continued with the prevailing indigenous mode of education where instructions mostly of religious nature were imparted moulding people to lead only pious lives and hence rendering them unfit for any official work. Finding it problematic, agents or officers had to be recruited by David Scott from neighbouring Bengal for official works to tide over the crisis. Much credit goes to Sir Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam who realized the importance of imparting education, the three R's, to the natives of the province to make them fit for official assignments which led to the beginning of schools. The introduction of written pattas (lease deed) instilled curiosity amongst the ignorant masses to have knowledge of the three R's to avoid being deceived. The Christian missions particularly the American Baptist mission's contribution to the field of education in Assam is indeed noteworthy. Gradually institutions of higher learning were also set up through the efforts of Manik Chandra Baruah, Sir Henry Stedman Cotton and others resulting in the birth of Cotton College in 1901.

Key Words- British rule, David Scott, Francis Jenkins, Christian missions, schools, Cotton College.

I. INTRODUCTION

Unlike other parts of India, Assam came under the grip of the British East India Company after its victory over the Burmese in the First Anglo-Burmese war (1824-26) in the aftermath of which was signed the Treaty of Yandobo on February 24, 1826. The land had been for a brief spell, 1821-1825 under the clutches of the Burmese who had taken advantage of the political instability and set up puppet Ahom kings and had unleashed a reign of terror in Assam. No wonder after they were vanquished the people in Assam heaved a sigh of relief and hailed with unbounded joy the success of the British as they were looked upon as their saviours with expectations of restoration of native Ahom rule which but remained as wishes.

Swinton, the then Political Secretary to the Government of India, wrote to David Scott (Agent to the Governor General on the Northeast Frontier of Bengal) 'although by our expulsion of the Burmese from the territory of Assam, the country becomes ours by right of conquest, the Governor General in Council does not contemplate the permanent annexation of any part of it to the British Dominion' (Cf Barpujari, H K, The Comprehensive History of Assam, vol. IV, p. 6, August 2007) Such proclamations kindled hopes amongst the inhabitants that native Ahom rule would be restored. However this was not to be and very soon the British reversed its stand. This goaded the native people into rebellion. But having successfully foiled several anti-colonial uprisings and plots designed for their ouster from Assam by skilful manoeuvre, the British gradually annexed Lower Assam in 1828 and Upper Assam in

1838 to the British Indian Empire and stayed on until India won independence in 1947.

A non-regulated Province, Assam was governed as a division of the Bengal Presidency since its annexation in 1826 and the administration was carried on by the Governor General in Council under the Regulating Act 1773 and Charter Act of 1833 between 1826-1873, with its headquarters in Fort William Calcutta. The Charter Act of 1833 made the Governor-General of Bengal the Governor General of India. To relieve the Governor General from enormous duties a Lieutenant Governor was appointed by the Despatch of 12 October 1853 in Bengal. As stated earlier, David Scott was appointed the Agent to the Governor General, North East Frontier from 1823-31. After his death, he was succeeded by W. Cracroft from September 1831 to April 1832. T C Robertson succeeded him in April 1832 and remained in office till April 1834. He was then succeeded by Francis Jenkins (1834-61) and Henry Hopkinson (1861-73).

Several factors brought forth suggestions at different times for re-organisation of the Bengal Presidency since it was too unwieldy. On 6th February 1874 Assam was separated from Bengal and constituted a Chief Commissioner's province under direct control of the Governor-General in Council with headquarters in Shillong. In September the district of Sylhet was also added to the Assam Chief Commissionership. Colonel R H Keatinge assumed charge of the Chief Commissioner on 7 February 1874. He was succeeded by S C Bayley, C A Elliot, W E Ward (officiating), C A Eliot, W E Ward (officiating), D. Fitzpatrick, J Westland, JW Quinton, H Collett (officiating), W E Ward, C J Lyall

(official), W E Ward, HJS Cotton, JB Fuller (officiating) H J Cotton (1st August 1900 to 28th April 1902), (Bulletin : Assam Archives).

II. DISCUSSION

The educational scenario at the time of the advent of the British was rather dismal. In the years preceding their rule traditional education was imparted which consisted of Sanskrit grammar, lexicon, the religious texts in the Sanskrit tols under Brahmana teachers. With the growth of the satra (Vaishnava monastery) institution new centres of learning and education developed which was aimed at moulding only the spiritual outlook. In the satras the disciples were imparted not only spiritual and moral education but also training in certain fine arts e.g music, dancing, painting as well as in crafts of bamboo, wood etc. In the villages, the Namghar (Vaishnava prayer house) was the centre of culture, education and learning. Education was confined to the priestly class, the kakoties (official scribes) and a few others connected to the government.

While setting up the new administration David Scott was confronted with the dearth of qualified people to take up posts of responsibility. As Assam was sparsely populated at that time and the few people available were quite inept for work he had to recruit amlahs from neighbouring Bengal to perform official tasks to tide over the crisis. He continued with the prevailing system of education and with the approval of the Government of India set up eleven schools mostly in Lower Assam where the only language taught was Sanskrit. Another school was founded in 1831 at Gauhati with the help of Adam White and a Christian missionary James Rae. (Barpujari H K, Political History of Assam, vol 1, Gauhati 1977). In 1833 with the aid of the Moravians Society T C Robertson wanted to establish a number of institutions for imparting practical knowledge but the scheme did not work out.

Sirs Francis Jenkins, the next Commissioner in Assam felt that in a province like Assam education should be a state responsibility. He proposed to the Government of India in his letter dated 21 June 1834 to set up of English schools under European supervision at the Sadar stations-Goalpara, Gauhati, Nowgong, Darrang and Bishwanath. He felt that a number of Assamese youths should be sent to Calcutta for necessary training and provisionally teachers capable of teaching English and Bengali would have to be brought from Bengal. The school buildings would be constructed by convicts of the local jail at a little expense. Positive steps towards education of Indians were taken only after Macaulay, the Governor General in Council resolved on 7th March 1835 that the object of the British government ought to be promotion of European literature and science amongst the natives of India. Jenkins proposal reached the General Committee of Public

Instruction and the latter accorded its approval in June 1835 for the establishment of an English school at Gauhati and in the next month Mr. Singer was appointed as its headmaster with a remuneration of 150 a month. Towards the end of the same year the school had made its beginning with an enrolment of 58 students which went on increasing.

III. RESPONSES AND RE-ACTIONS

Since the Gauhati school was located at Guwahati and was not easily accessible to the pupils from Upper Assam, for the education of the sons of the Ahom royal family and the gentry of the realm Brodie (the Principal Assistant, Sibsagar) proposed to establish an English school at the sadar station and branch schools at Jaypur and Jorhat. However paucity of funds compelled deferment of the scheme until 1841 when an English school was started at Sibsagar with Mr. D.S'ouza as its headmaster. Meanwhile Singer was substituted by William Robinson as the Headmaster of Gauhati school.

The increasing demand of English education led to the opening up of a number of branch schools funded by the public in the vicinity of Gauhati-Pandu, Kamakhya, Beltola, Amingaon and North Gauhati. (Cf Barpujari, HK Political History of Assam, p.106 Gauhati 1977) Yet owing to the general poverty and ignorance of the people, many people in rural areas were content to live and die as their forefathers did-many nurtured a desire to have rudiments of education if opportunities were available nearer home.

The urge for acquisition of knowledge was further enhanced with the introduction of the new revenue measures by the Colonial Raj in 1833-34 which required the services of a number of minor revenue officers-the thakurias, gaon-kakoties etc. The introduction of written pattas (lease deed) too kindled the urgency even amongst the ignorant masses in the interior to be acquainted with the three R's so that they were not misled into believing the corrupt amlahs of the court. James Mathie, the Collector of Kamrup in 1838 hence suggested to the government a scheme of village schools through which existing indigenous institutions could be developed to impart instructions to the masses in reading, writing and arithmetic as a solution. But despite the support of educationists like Adam, Munro and Elphinstone, the General Committee of Public Instruction's attitude towards mass education was not appreciable. It clung adamantly to the filtration theory-that education should spread gradually from the higher to the lower classes and therefore the Gauhati school should produce a class of local instructors through whose agency the benefits of similar education should percolate to the masses. Mathie's efforts and proposal thus remained to be approved for sometime but on the strong recommendation of the President-in Council the

scheme finally received the nod of the Supreme Government as an experimental measure. By August 1835 21 village schools were established in Kamrup and similar schools were set up at Darrang and Nowgaon in the next two years . By 1843 the total number of village schools rose to 12 in Nowgong, 5 in Darrang and 22 in Kamrup.(Cf Barpujari H k et al,Political History of Assam p.107,Gauhati,1977)

The role of the Christian missionaries in the promotion of education in Assam is immense and invaluable though motivated by a proselytizing spirit from the very beginning. Their primary aim appeared to have been evangelization and in consideration of the fact that basic education was crucial to read and understand the Bible they wholeheartedly plunged themselves into spreading education. Two Baptist missionaries Reverend Nathan Brown and Reverend Oliver Cutter took the initiative in starting a school at Sadiya in January 1837 and within a week, 20 pupils enrolled themselves .

By 1845, the American Baptist Missionaries had set up 3 schools at Nowgong, 5 in Kamrup and 14 in Sibsagar with an average attendance of 347 students.(Cf Barpujari H k et al,Political History of Assam p.107,Gauhati,1977) The Welsh Calvinistic missionaries who had begun their activities the Khasi-Jayantia Hills had by 1858 about a dozen schools to their credit. The Missionaries preferred Assamese to English as medium and is reflected by the manner in which they took up the task of learning the regional language, translating English works into vernacular and publishing books for the use of the pupils. The Christian teachers imparted knowledge on some useful arts ,gave instructions in the three R's –reading, writing and arithmetic besides religious lessons. Industrial schools at Namsang and Nowgong were opened by Bronson.

Assamese was the medium of instruction in the mission schools while in the village schools Bengali was the medium covering elements of reading, writing and arithmetic while at the sadar schools there were two independent departments – English and Bengali. In the junior classes the subjects taught were Wilson's chronology, Yates Elements of Natural Philosophy , English grammar, the use of globes, arithmetic , translation and composition while in the senior classes the curriculum consisted of Marshman's History of India, Homer's Iliad by Pope, Elements of Natural Philosophy, geography, arithmetic up to vulgar fractions, compositions and translations. Provisions were also made for the teaching of the classical subjects, Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian.

Great importance was attached to the study of English from the very beginning for it was mainly the lure of jobs which attracted most of the students to the English department. But , it soon surfaced that the beginners found it extremely difficult to tackle English both as a subject and language of instruction . This was evident from the fact that in

the very first year of the Gauhati school several students did not turn up after admission on account of the unintelligibility of the English language. There was a rapid fall in enrolment and it dwindled to such an extent that in 1844 the Government thought it wise to make teaching of English optional. Consequently both the schools at Gauhati and Sibsagar were converted into Anglo-Vernacular schools.

As improvement of English schools became problematic the local authorities directed their attention to augment the number of vernacular schools for the spread of education. As a result the number of vernacular schools increased in 1852 to 74 with an enrolment of 4025,of these 26 schools were in Kamrup, 13 in Nowgong, 9 each in the districts of Sibsagar and Nowgong. Until 1856-57 in Cachar there was not a school worth the name. In 1865-66 there were 7 schools in existence. The position was slightly better in Sylhet which had 28 schools with an enrolment of 1127 schools.

William Robinson , the Headmaster of the Gauhati school was appointed the Inspector of schools in 1841 .Wood's Despatch of 1854 however brought in further changes which recommended education of the masses through a number of High schools, Middle schools and Primary schools to be supported by grants-in aid .This laid the foundation of the modern system of education in India and the earlier filtration theory –that education should disseminate from the higher to the lower stratum in society was thus repudiated .

In August 1855 G F F Vincent , the Collector of Darrang, urged the Inspector of schools to establish a college in Assam and this demand increased since 1860's. In 1862 representations for the establishment of a High School or College were made to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal when the latter paid a visit to Assam and William Robinson also emphasised on the establishment of a provincial college in Assam in his representation on 4 October 1862. Mr. Murray who succeeded Robinson as the Inspector of schools too urged upon the authorities for collegiate education in Assam in October 1864, yet feeling somehow that the government may not be in consonance to provide an expensive college for the handful of students then coming out from the two schools at Gauhati and Sibsagar proposed instead to upgrade the standard of the Gauhati school to the F.A Course of the Calcutta University. The Government of India readily consented and the Gauhati school was upgraded to a Collegiate school.

The collegiate section had begun in May 1866 at the Gauhati school but the enrolment was rather poor attributed to few successful candidates at the Entrance Examination . In 1870-71 the total enrolment stood at 17,it lowered to 7 in 1875-76. What ultimately led the authorities to revert the Gauhati school to its earlier status was its disappointing results; in 1869-70 of the 2 candidates who appeared at the FA Examination 1 passed but

during the years 1872-74 not a single candidate could come out successful in the university exam. With the reconstitution of Assam in 1874 into a Chief Commissioner's Province and the emergence of a separate Directorate of Education changes came in - impediments arising out of the scarcity of text books was gradually removed by the publication of a series of suitable textbooks on various subjects for the Assamese pupils. The English schools were also on the increase. The total number of High schools including those of the Surma valley in 1881-82 was 11 with an enrolment of 2264 while there were 37 Middle English schools with 2929 pupils on the rolls. There was also a steady increase in the percentage of successful candidates since 1880 in the Entrance Examinations. The English educated youths became conscious of the fact that the sons of the soil must have the major share in the high offices in the state . The agitation centred in the beginning not so much in capturing a number of posts but in acquiring the means of getting the requisite qualification for them.

There was not only an increase in the number of English schools on private enterprise but also an organized move for the promotion of collegiate education in the last quarter of the 19th century. For the reopening of the collegiate classes at the Gauhati school the educated public reiterated the Chief Commissioner of Assam Sir Steuart Bailey, the difficulties experienced by the Assamese students in Calcutta in 1878.

Sir Charles Elliot, the next Chief Commissioner 's stance was to re-open of the college classes if the university results continued to be satisfactory and in the meantime decided to raise the value of the scholarships to rupees 20 to be awarded to all Assamese students who would proceed for higher education to any college in Bengal. However, the reduction in the number of scholarships by William Ward , the then Chief Commissioner without a further move on the part of the government to implement the collegiate scheme as assured by Elliot

led to a renewal of the agitation. Differences however arose as to the location of the college.

CONCLUSION

Manik Chandra Baruah, an articulate Assamese in his memorial on 28 March 1899 strongly advocated for the establishment of a second grade college at Gauhati. Baruah stated ' : Assam is the only province which has not got a college. .. A college at Gauhati with a European Principal will be better appreciated .' Assam Archives file). The Chief Commissioner Sir Henry John Stedman Cotton felt in lieu of a local college a hostel for Assamese students in Calcutta would be better but decided to ascertain the views of the public . In response to his circulars, representations poured in from all quarters and the Chief Commissioner Sir Henry accepted the people's verdict and unanimously endorsed a college in Gauhati and took immediate steps to lay the foundation of the college at Gauhati in 1901. The college was named after him ,Cotton College. Thus, the small remnant of people who had been harassed and oppressed by long civil and internal wars, who escaped sword and captivity finally saw growth of English schools, the restoration of Assamese as lingua franca in 1873, and a college during the early years of British rule in Assam.

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