

History of Missionary's Education in Assam

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Abstract

The missionaries are regarded as the founders of modern system of education in India by many scholars including northeastern region. Many British and American Christian Missionaries started working to promote education and well being of people of Assam especially the local tribes as early as 1626 A.D. They also established English medium schools in town and urban areas. Besides they established boarding schools for destitutes, orphans and girls. They worked towards the promotion of vernacular schools as well as for the upliftment of the tribal areas of Assam. In the post Independence period their work in Assam was not only confined to its educational efforts but it has extended its activities in various other spheres of life. In the last quarter of the twentieth century some important developments took place in the functioning for missionary in Assam.

History of Missionary's Education in India

The Portuguese Missionaries can well be regarded as the founders of modern system of Education in India. "Among the earliest Missionaries to arrive, and the best known among them, was a Portuguese, namely, St. Francis Xavier, who arrived India in 1542 A.D."¹ In 1575, he founded a University, i.e. St. Anne University, at Bandra, near Bombay and established a press at Cochin. Another

Portuguese religious Missionary was Robert De Nobili, whose services in the cause of Christianity were remarkable. "The Portuguese established the first Jesuit College in 1575 at Goa. In 1580, more colleges were established at Goa and other places too."²

In the beginning of the seventeenth century the Dutch also established their trading companies in India. They started their commercial centres at Chinsura and Hoogli in Bengal. There, they

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¹ DODWELL, H. H., *The Cambridge Shorter History of India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, U.K., 1938, p. 391.

² MAHAJAN, V. D. and MAHAJAN, SAVITRI, *British Rule in India and After*, S. Chand and Co., New Delhi, India, 1968, p.7.

established some schools for the education of the children of company's employees. The Indian children too were allowed to study in these schools. They preached the tenets of the Protestants Church among the Christians through educational institutions. They extended the sphere of their activities even upto Ceylon. "The French established their first trading company in India in the year 1664. They opened their factories at Mahe, Yaman, Karaikol, Chandranagar and Pondicherry."³ At these places, they started their schools too. They established a secondary school at Pondicherry where French language was taught. "In 1659, the Court of Directors of the East India Company declared their earnest desire by all possible means to propagate the Gospel, and allowed Missionaries to embark on their ships."⁴ "In 1670, they made inquiries about the education of children of Fort St. George at Madras and in 1673, appointed a Scotch preacher named Pringle to teach the children of Portuguese and British Eurasians."⁵

The above discussion indicates the initial stages of Missionary's educational enterprise in India. In the beginning, the Missionaries had to pass through various stages of ups and downs and gradually their educational institutions spread all over the country.

The State of Assam

Assam is one of the North-Eastern states of India. Its capital is Dispur, a suburb of Guwahati city in Kamrup district. It comprises of three natural divisions, viz., the Brahmaputra River valley, the Barak River Valley and the Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills with an area of 78,438 square kilometres. "Assam is connected to the rest of India by a narrow strip in West Bengal popularly known as the Chickens Neck".⁶ It also shares international borders with Bhutan and Bangladesh.

"The word 'Assam' as interpreted by some scholars is derived from the name of 'The Ahoms', the dynasty that ruled the land for six hundred years prior to its annexation by the British."⁷

Assam comprises of 3.7% Christian population. According to the National Census of 2001, the Christian population is 9,86,589 out of the total population of 26,655,528. The literacy rate of Assam's Christian population is 56.4% which is remarkably low in comparison to the national norm of Christian literacy, i.e. 80.3%.

"The low rate of literacy among Christians of Assam is due to the fact that Christian population of Assam is largely made up of tea garden labourers and ex-tea garden labourers chiefly drawn from Bihar, Orissa and Andhra

³ MAHAJAN, V. D. and MAHAJAN, SAVITRI, op.cit., p.7.

⁴ VAKIL, K. S. and S. NATARAJAN : *Education in India*, Allied Publishers, Calcutta, India, 1966, p. 48.

⁵ Law, N. N., op.cit., pp. 11-12.

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assam>;

⁷ SRIVASTAVA, DAYAWANTI and MOHAN CHANDAK, *India 2008, A Reference Annua*, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi, 2008, p. 388.

i.e. they comprise of 80% of the Christians in Assam.”⁸

Assam is consisting of twenty seven (27) districts. These are:

Districts in Assam

1. Tinsukia, 2. Dibrugarh, 3. Sibsagar, 4. Dhemaji, 5. Jorhat, 6. Lakhimpur, 7. Golaghat, 8. Sonitpur, 9. Karbi Anglong, 10. Nagaon, 11. Marigaon, 12. Darrang, 13. Kamrup Rural, 14. Nalbari, 15. Barpeta, 16. Bongaigaon, 17. Goalpara, 18. Kokrajhar, 19. Dhubri, 20. North Cachar Hills, 21. Cachar, 22. Hailakandi, 23. Karimganj, 24. Kamrup Metropolitan, 25. Baksa, 26. Chirang and 27. Udalguri.

Missionary's Education in Assam

The Christian Missionaries landed in Assam in as early as 1626 A.D. “Two Catholic Portuguese Jesuit Missionaries, Cabral and Cacella reached Hajo and Guwahati as travellers on September 26, 1626 A.D., on their way to Tibet from Hoogly.”⁹ Though they didn't settle down in Assam yet, they were considered to be the first Christian Missionaries to set foot in Assam.

“Assam came under the British rule in February 24, 1826, after the treaty of Yandaboo was signed between the British and Burmese, when the latter

was defeated at the hand of the British army.”¹⁰ It was only after 1826, that the Missionary educational effort started in Assam. From the very beginning of the British rule in Assam, Missionary activities were favoured by the Government. David Scott, who was the first agent to the Governor-General in North East Frontier, encouraged the establishment of a Mission in Guwahati, the chief station (Headquarter) of the province, and he also urged for establishing a Mission school there. “In, 1829, the Baptist Missionary Society (B.M.S) or the English Baptists started their activities in Assam by opening a branch of Serampore Mission in Guwahati on the request of Scott.”¹¹ Simultaneously, the Guwahati Mission School was founded at the initiative of Mr. Adam White, Assistant to the Commissioner in Lower Assam.

“Robertson, the successor of Scott, during his short administration (April 1832 – January 1834) was more occupied in the administrative work, and had hardly anytime to do something regarding the propagation of Gospel. Mr. Francis Jenkins, the next Commissioner of Assam was much interested in evangelical activities.”¹² He felt that the backward hill people were really in need

⁸ RAO, O. M., *Focus on North East Indian Christianity*, Indians Society for Promotion, Christian Knowledge (ISPCK), Delhi, India, 1994, p. 52.

⁹ *Catholic Directory of India*, St. Paul's Publications, Bangalore, India, (2005-2006), p. 601.

¹⁰ TAHER, M. and P. AHMED. *Geography of North-East India*, Mani Manik Prakash, Guwahati, Assam, India, 2001, p. 5.

¹¹ SWORD, V. K., *Baptists in Assam*, Macmillan & Co., Chicago, U.S.A., 1935, p. 36.

¹² BARKATAKI, M. S., *British Administration in North East India (1826-74)*, Mittal Publications, Delhi, India, 1985, p. 88.

of a spiritual reformation and education. With this object in view, he sent an initiation to Reverend W.H. Pearce, of the British Missionary Society in Calcutta. "But instead of sending British Missionaries, Reverend Pearce suggested that the American Baptist Missionary, already working in Burma, had an interest to work among the Shans (a Mongoloid hill tribe of Assam), and therefore, they should be invited to Assam."¹³ Accordingly, two American Missionaries, Reverend Nathan Brown and Reverend Oliver Cutter were asked to proceed to Sadiya, a town in Upper Assam. "In September 1835, they reached Calcutta with their families. After a tedious journey of four months in the river Brahmaputra, these two Missionaries reached Sadiya on the 23rd March 1836."¹⁴ "They were the first American Missionaries to land in Assam, and under their supervision a school house was built and classes started in June 1836."¹⁵ Thus, simultaneously, two Missions started their work in Assam, one in Guwahati, Lower Assam under the British Missionary Society (B.M.S.), a branch of the Serampore Mission, and the other at Sadiya, Upper Assam under the American Baptist Mission.

In April 1838, Bronson moved to Jaipur, a place near Sadiya in Assam-Nagaland border with his family. In

Jaipur, Bronson found that the Nagas, one of the local tribes, to be more promising for Missionary works than the other hills tribes and decided to work among them. "In 1839, the Home Board sent Cyrus Barker, another Missionary to Jaipur to work among the Nagas."¹⁶ But the Missionary's life at Sadiya was not safe due to frequent aggression of the Khamtis (a local tribe of Sadiya region). Soon, they found that Sadiya was not the proper place to teach the Shans, and their attention was naturally turned to the people of the plains. Moreover, Barker intended much to work among the Assamese of the plains where, he was confident that the Missionaries would be successful in their schemes. So, Barker wanted a place where Assamese population was more, and from this point of view he decided to settle down at Sibsagar, a town in Central Assam. "On 24th May, 1841, Barker shifted to Sibsagar and established a Mission there."¹⁷ Reverend Brown followed him. As a result, Bronson was no more encouraged by them to stay at Sadiya. "Finally Bronson, too, gave up the work, and came to Nowgong in October 1841 at the suggestion of Jenkins, and started a Mission there."¹⁸ By the end of 1843, the Missionaries were fully established at Sibsagar, Nowgong and Guwahati. "In December 1845, the first Baptist Church

¹³ GAMMEL, WILLIAM A. M., *History of American Baptist Mission*, Boston, U.S.A., 1850, p. 212.

¹⁴ BARKATAKI, M. S., *op.cit.*, p. 89.

¹⁵ CHAKRAVARTY, ARCHANA, *History of Education in Assam (1826-1919)*, Mittal Publications, Delhi, India, 1989, p. 125.

¹⁶ DOWNS, F. S., *The Mighty Works of God*, L.B.H. Publication, Guwahati, Assam, India, 1971, p.23

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 28.

¹⁸ GAMMEL, WILLIAM A. M., *op.cit.* p. 219.

was opened at Guwahati. By January 1845, Brown and Oliver Cutter established fourteen schools under the Sibsagar Baptist Mission."¹⁹ They learned English, simultaneously, with their vernacular studies. "The aggressiveness of hill tribes was absent in Brahmaputra valley but the real opposition came mostly from the Assamese Brahmins, who became a great obstacle to the flow of evangelization."²⁰ The opposition from the Brahmins were confronted in all the three centres, viz. Guwahati, Nowgong and Sibsagar.

Apart from these, for the orphans and destitutes, boarding schools were established in Nowgong, Guwahati and Sibsagar. "In 1844, Miles Bronson established an orphan school at Nowgong with the contribution from the English residents of Assam."²¹ In addition to this, he also established two English schools, one in Nowgong and the other in the Khasi-Jayantia Hills. The Nowgong Mission School was also established by Miles Bronson in 1846.

The American Baptists had the credit of starting the first school for girls in Assam. "In 1844, the first school of this kind was established at Sibsagar by Mrs. Cutter and Mrs. Brown. This was followed by two other girl schools at Nowgong and Guwahati."²² "In 1946,

three years after their settlement at Sibsagar, the American Baptist Missionaries started the publication of a native monthly newspaper *Arunodoi Sambad Patra* from the Sibsagar Baptist Mission press. It was the first vernacular newspaper in Assamese and Reverend O.T. Cutter was its first editor."²³

During the famous language controversy of Assam, which started after the Despatch of 1854, when the Government tried to impose Bengali as the state language and medium of instruction in schools against the will of the native Assamese people. The Missionaries wholeheartedly supported the native's cause and also tried to replace the then prevailing Bengali with local Assamese at the law courts and schools. "Reverend Brown and O.T. Cutter produced in 1836, the First Assamese Spelling Book for use in their schools. In 1839, Robinson published a grammar book in Assamese; in 1848, Brown published Grammatical Note in Assamese."²⁴ "In 1867, Reverend Bronson after a hard labour of 12 years published an Anglo-Assamese dictionary from the Baptist Mission press of Sibsagar."²⁵

The Revolt of 1857 brought about a radical change in the policy of Government towards Missionaries in the whole country. They were considered

¹⁹ BARKATAKI, M. S., op.cit., p. 97.

²⁰ SWORD, V. K., op.cit. 72.

²¹ GAMMEL, WILLIAM A. M., op.cit., p. 223.

²² CHAKRAVARTY, ARCHANA, op.cit., p. 129.

²³ CHAKRAVARTY ARCHANA, op.cit., p. 59.

²⁴ Assam District Gazetteer, Sibsagar, Revised edition, Government of Assam, Shillong, India, 1967, p. 387.

²⁵ BARKATAKI, M. S., op.cit. p. 11.

responsible to a great extent for the unfortunate happenings. But the Government of Assam, however, thought that the teaching of the Bible or any other holy scripture was not objectionable and harmful, particularly, in a hill state like Assam.

The Missionaries also directed their attention to the backward remote areas of the plains as well. In 1857, the Church Missionary Society opened some schools in the district of Darrang to educate the Kachari, Mikir and other non-Aryan tribes confined to that area. These schools were placed under the management of Reverend C.H. Hesselmeier, Superintendent of the Tezpur Church Mission.

The above discussion gave a clear picture that the Baptist Missionaries were the torch-bearer of the Modern education in Assam. They rendered unique service towards the promotion of vernacular schools and also for the upliftment of the tribal areas of the region.

But, since 1850, the Catholic Missionaries from different European countries also became actively involved towards educational upliftment of the region. At present, most of the Missionary schools in Assam are under the supervision of the Catholic Missionaries. As discussed earlier that the Catholics Missionaries were first to have landed in Assam in as early as 1626, but the Catholic's educational enterprise in Assam began only during

the later part of the nineteenth century, when "In June 1850, Father Robin Bourry, Krick and Bernardi of the Institute of the Foreign Missions of Paris reached Guwahati."²⁶ Father Robin tried to learn Assamese and established a centre at Bongia, a place near Guwahati. Father Krick proceeded to Nowgong and from there to Dibrugarh with the intention of going to Tibet. "Father Krick was the first Catholic Missionary to reach Dibrugarh, on September 6, 1851."²⁷ In February 1854, while trying to make their way to Tibet along the Lohit River, a Mishmi (A tribe in Upper Assam) Chief killed Father Krick and Father Bourry. In 1860, Mr. Mercier, the Arch Bishop of Dacca is known to have visited Dibrugarh. In 1870, Assam was made a part of the Prefecture Apostolic (Catholic's Regional Headquarters) of Krishnagar, of West Bengal, which was entrusted to the Foreign Missionaries of Milan (Italy). "Mr. Jacopo Broy, of the Institute of the Foreign Missions of Milan took up residence in Guwahati and looked after the entire 'Assam Missions' from this central place. Soon, he went to Nowgong where he built a small church. In Guwahati, he built a brick church in 1883."²⁸ In February, 1890, the German Salvatorian Missionaries reached Guwahati. Father Gallus Schrole and Rudolph Fontaine, of the German Salvatorian Mission were the two great Catholic Missionaries of Assam Valley.

By this time, many Catholics from Chota Nagpur came to Assam to work in

²⁶ "Catholic Directory of India", op.cit., p. 601.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 479.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 601.

the tea gardens of the state. "In 1889, the Prefecture Apostolic of Assam was created with headquarters at Shillong, and was entrusted to the German Salvatorian Fathers. With the outbreak of World War I, the German Salvatorian Fathers were forced to return to their country and Jesuits of Calcutta looked after Assam till it was entrusted to the Salesians of Don Bosco (Italy) in 1921."²⁹ In 1922, the Salesians of Don Bosco arrived in North East. This was regarded as the turning point towards development of Missionary's Secondary Schools in Assam. At present, most of the Missionary Schools in Assam are under the supervision of Salesians of Don Bosco. From 1923, Father Piasecki looked after the whole of Assam valley from his headquarter at Guwahati. It was from Guwahati that the Missionary works in upper Assam, Tezpur, Garo Hills and Bhutan were started. Some of the first Catholic Missionaries of Manipur and Nagaland had studied at Guwahati. "In 1931, Father Piasecki opened the Dibrugarh Mission."³⁰

In the post Independence period, the Missionary's work in Assam was not only confined to its educational efforts. But, instead, it has extended its activities in the various spheres of social services like establishment of Vocational and Technical Institutes for orphans, boarding for working girls and women, old-aged homes, crèches, hospitals, dispensaries, press and publications units, etc. But these Missionary institutions flourished full when the

Catholic Missionaries through their well organized administrative system established their institutions in every nook and corner of the state.

At present, the whole of the Missionary activities in Assam is controlled by its headquarter in Guwahati, which is called the 'Archdiocese of Guwahati.' It is headed by the 'Archbishop' and under his leadership the whole of the Missionary work in entire Assam is controlled and governed. This 'Archdiocese' is further divided into sub-headquarters known as 'Diocese' and, at present, in Assam there are four 'Diocese' under 'Archdiocese' of Guwahati. These are (a) Diocese of Dibrugarh, (b) Diocese of Tezpur, (c) Diocese of Diphu, and (d) Diocese of Bongaigaon.

Each of these Dioceses has a unique history of development which is briefly discussed in the following paragraphs.

In 1951, the Diocese of Shillong, which was then the headquarter of the Missionary work in Assam was bifurcated and the Diocese of Dibrugarh was created with Reverend O. Marengo, as the First Bishop. "On 10th May, 1964, His Holiness Pope Paul VI visited Tezpur, and the Diocese of Shillong was once again divided and the Diocese of Tezpur was created and Reverend O. Marengo, who was then the Bishop of Dibrugarh was transferred to Tezpur and on August 23, 1964, he became its first Bishop."³¹ In 1969, Shillong Diocese was raised to the status of Metropolitan See (district under the Archbishop) and a new Ecclesiastical

²⁹ Ibid, p. 1075.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 601.

³¹ Ibid, p. 479.

Province (Arch Diocese) of Shillong–Guwahati was created and Reverend Hubert D' Rosario was transferred from Dibrugarh to Shillong as its first Arch Bishop. The Archdiocese of Shillong–Guwahati was divided again in 1973 to form the Diocese of Tura (in Meghalaya). The next division of Shillong–Guwahati Archdiocese led to the creation of Diphu diocese on 5th December 1983, detaching the district of Karbi Anglong from the Archdiocese of Shillong–Guwahati and district of North Cachar Hills from the Diocese of Silchar. Most Reverend Mathai Kochuparampil was appointed as the first Bishop of this new Diocese.

Further bifurcation of Shillong–Guwahati Archdiocese was made in 1992 with the creation of Guwahati Diocese. "Pope John Paul II erected the Diocese of Guwahati on 30 March, 1992. The Archdiocese of Guwahati was erected by Pope John Paul II on 1st August, 1995."³² The Diocese of Bongaigaon was carved out of the Archdiocese of Guwahati in 2000, and it consists of Baksa, Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Chirang, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, and Nalbari districts of lower Assam that covers the surface area of 13,630 sq.km.

One of the most important aspects of the Missionary's work in entire North Eastern region in the post independence period was that in mid-sixties soon after the Chinese war, the north eastern region as a whole had become a

disturbed area. The Government had great difficulty in stopping the unrest in Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Manipur and recently in Assam itself. Violence became part of daily life in North East India as a whole. So, in the midst of these disturbances the Missionaries, especially, foreign Missionaries became the target of the attack. "The anti-Missionary movement began to increase after the Chinese invasion and by 1968, it made headlines in the country's news media and ushered in an open policy of the Government to restrict the foreign Missionaries in North-East India. The reason the Government gave was that North-East India had become a 'Sensitive area'."³³ In 1968, the Baptist Christian Community had a protest conference with the Roman Catholics about this at the Dibrugarh on the campus of the Don Bosco High School. "By 1974, most of the foreign Missionaries had left from all over North-East India, and the last one, a Nursing Superintendent of Guwahati Mission Hospital, Miss Mary Suderman, left in 1984."³⁴

In the last quarter of the twentieth century two important developments took place in the entire Missionary works of Assam.

- (i) From the beginning of the Missionary work in Assam, both the Foreign as well as Indian Missionaries started their work uniformly for the entire

³² *Catholic Directory of North-East India*, St. Paul's Publications, Bangalore, India, (2002-2003), p. 32.

³³ SAIKIA, S. K., *History of Education in India*, Mani Manik Prakash, Guwahati, Assam, 2002, p.48.

³⁴ RAO, O. M., *Among the Churches of the Hills and Valleys of North East India*, ISPCK, Delhi, India 2005, p.xxx.

masses of the state, but in the recent times, the Indian Catholic Missionaries did extensive work among the Tribals and Hill people of the state and found them to be more ripe field for their proselitisation activity. The conversions among these hill people of animistic background were great compared to the Assamese, who with their ancient Hindu faith did not respond well to the Christian Gospel.

- (ii) Likewise, it is noticed that with the commencement of the tea plantations in North-East India and the importation of the tea-garden labourers from other parts of India,

the Missionaries found that these alien settlers were more receptive to the Gospel, as conversions took place on a large scale. So, a marked shift took place in the Mission work in the plains of Assam, i.e. from the town and villages of the Assamese to the tea settlement areas. Thus, at present, though most of the Missionary institutions like schools, hospitals, orphanages, women's hostels, homes for senior citizens, crèches, presses, etc. were maintained in urban centres like Guwahati, Nagaon, Jorhat, Sibsagar, etc. and the work in the plains of Assam has become largely a rural Mission work.