

ORUNODOI: THE RISING OF THE SUN IN ASSAM

- Dr. Maloshi Choudhury

Abstract

The missionaries came to North East India with a primary object of spreading Christianity among the people. Assam's location as a highway to Tibet and western China was taken as a matter of great strategic importance from missionary point of view. As the missionaries began the work of evangelism, they found that without the knowledge of the three 'R's, there would be little or no effect of their mission. Thus, this practical need of imparting elementary education as a handmaid to evangelism along with the encouragements received from the government officials to run the schools with grant in aid induced the missionaries to set up schools wherever they established their mission centres. The activities of Christian missionaries in India evoke appreciation and criticism. Nevertheless, the missionaries, rather than threatening Assamese culture, liberalized and preserved it and helped in modernizing the language. Therefore, the historians have rightly termed the era of American Baptist Missionaries as a period of 'cultural progress' in Assam.

Keywords: *American Baptist Mission; evangelism; the three 'R's; elementary education; liberalisation and preservation; cultural progress.*

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The British occupied Assam in 1824 as an incident of their war with the Burmese, and at the conclusion of that war in 1826, it was ceded to them by signing of Yandaboo treaty. The American Baptist Mission entered Assam in 1836 simply as a step towards entering China from the west. Assam's location as a highway to Tibet and western China was taken as a matter of great strategic importance from missionary point of view. Another important fact was the proximity of Sadiya (a town in Eastern Assam) to what was believed to be a practical pass from India to China. The missionaries came to North East India with a primary object of spreading Christianity among the people. But as they began the work of evangelism, they found that without the knowledge of the three 'R's, there would be little or no effect of their mission. Thus, this practical need of imparting elementary education as a handmaid to evangelism along with the encouragements received from the government officials to run the schools with grant in aid induced the missionaries to set up schools wherever they established their mission centres. In the beginning they ran, the primary schools only, but the practical difficulties in securing teachers to teach in the growing schools, other necessities and demands compelled the missionaries to open teachers' Normal training schools, Middle English, High English schools and other Industrial and Theological institutions. As a result, of the agencies that contributed to the spread of education in North East India, the American Baptist Mission was one of the foremost.

Assam was one of the twelve principal civil divisions into which India is divided for convenience of administration by the British. Among these it ranked tenth in extent of territory and eleventh in number of population. But its location at the very north-east corner of the Indian empire, bringing it into relationship with border tribes, and also promising a way into Tibet and western China, did lend it a greater degree of importance.

The American Baptist Mission invariably opened a School in every Station or Town where they started a mission centre. Their main purpose was to train the young people to be the teachers and leaders of their own areas and to lead an exemplary Christian life.

In the history of education and specifically of 'Teacher Education' of the North East, the missionaries played a crucial role. The teacher training in Assam dates back to 1882, when the Indian Education (Hunter) Commission made the first recommendation for the establishments of Normal schools in the country. The missionaries took the initiative in the establishment of training schools at Shillong and Tura in undivided Assam. After 1884, the

provincial government accepted the principle of establishing Normal schools, one in each district. But by 1888-89 only 6(six) departmental schools came to be established one each in the districts of Kamrup, Sibsagar, Lakhimpur, Khasi and Jaintia hills, and two in Darrang

The British with a view to imparting English education to the Assamese (Assam) youths and making them fit to get junior posts in the administration had established the first school in Guwahati in 1835 and another school at Sibsagar in 1840. By 1856, many English schools had been established in Assam. The first schools were started by the Serampore Baptist Mission in Assam as an extension of their mission in Bengal. It was fortunate for the mission that the British officials were interested in setting up of schools in Assam. To name a few we can mention David Scott, the first commissioner of Assam, James Rae, who resigned Govt. service to join Missionary service. During the early days of the East India Company mofussil committees were set up with the local inhabitants as members. In 1841 William Robinson was appointed as the inspector of schools. Teaching condition at the schools was dismal. Monitorial system was recommended for the improvement of teaching/learning situation in the schools. Bell Lancaster system was the corner stone of teacher training system. Stanley's Despatch of Education(1851) also laid great emphasis on Teacher Education. The mission of the Baptist mission for educating the masses flourished due to the already existing government propaganda.

The missionaries get the credit for promoting the cause of female education in general. Christian constituency in America supported missionary enterprise and with the establishment of various mission stations, schools for girls were organized where single lady missionaries were appointed to establish and supervise the education of indigenous girls. In 1844 the first school for girls was established by Mrs. Cutter and Mrs. Brown at Sibsagar. This was followed by two other girls' schools at Nowgong and Guwahati. Mrs. Bronson and Mrs. Barker also contributed towards the cause of female education.

'Letters of Mrs. Brown' outlines the growth and events of girl education institutes. Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Cutter also took part in translating, teaching and preaching both in and around Sibsagar from 1846 onwards. An excerpt from the Letters of Mrs. Brown is given below to underline the impact of the missionaries in the domain of female education.

"The female members of the church, and my little school of women and girls, have occupied much of my time and attention during the past season. Two of the women-one a member of the church(last baptized)-finished "the first Reading Book" to-day-a great day of Assam! I do not think the hurculean task of two married women having learned to read, has ever before been accomplished in this province. The women are so stupid after having grown up in their ignorance , that they are fully impressed with the belief that they cannot learn;besides the redicule to which to which they are subjected makes it very difficult to induce them to continue. Our old Brahmin pandit often comes along my little school room, and laughs at the idea of my spending my time teaching women to read. I have had a few very promising little girls given to me by their parents and guardians, whom I hope to keep in a good degree separate from heathen influences'

Thus, among the changes that were perceived to have taken place in Assam during the Baptist Mission period was the desire among females for education and willingness among the men folk in allowing the women to learn.

For the missionaries it was regarded as a fundamental rule that all classes must hear in their own tongue the wonderful works of God. For the missionaries though the Assamese and Bengali languages were identical and though they used the already available translated texts in Bengali for the Assamese people, they focussed on writing texts in the Native language. The introduction of Bengali in the schools of Assam and as a court language in April 1836 during the British regime resulted in two language movements - Official Language Movement and Language movement on medium of instruction in the sixties and seventies respectively, of the previous century. Due to regionalization of medium English education in the state was affected to a considerable extent. In 1836, the British rulers imposed Bengali as the court language as well as the medium of instruction in Assam. The justification of this imposition was that Assamese was thought to be a colloquial dialect and sub-language of Bengali. William Robinson, Inspector of Government schools, in his book *Grammar of the Assamese Language* published in 1839 stated that Assamese was identical to Bengali. Therefore, his book cannot be considered as the grammar of the Assamese language. Anandaram Dekhial Phukan actively participated in initiating the movement of bestowing the needful prestige to Assamese language. In 1855, he wrote a book titled 'A few remarks on the Assamese language, and on vernacular education in Assam' using a pen name, 'A native'. Nathan Brown, a missionary established that Assamese was a widely understood vernacular in Assam and that it was a language distinct from Bengali. Moreover, in contrast to the government, the schools founded by Brown and other Baptist missionaries used Assamese as the medium of instruction. Taking the legacy of Brown, Miles Bronson spearheaded the struggle for restoration of Assamese language until the battle was finally won.

Among the missionaries in Assam, Reverend Dr. Nathan Brown stands out for his valuable contribution to Assamese language and literature. He was instrumental in establishing the first printing press in Assam, which ushered in a new literary development in the region. With Sibsagar (Sivasagar), on the banks of the Dikhow River, as his base, he carried on various activities. Brown admired the Assamese language and went around teaching, translating and preparing books in Assamese. The credit of publishing the first Assamese Grammar book in 1848 and a part of the Bible in pure and simple Assamese goes to him. He was also a pioneer in writing school books. He wrote books on elementary Arithmetic and Geography which were much superior to Bengali books used in schools at that time. In all his pursuits, his wife Eliza, who was a translator in her own right, ably assisted him. The magnum opus of Brown was the news magazine "Orunodoi", which was the first of its kind in Assamese. In 1846 the first number of Orunodoi, a monthly magazine devoted to religion, science and general intelligence was published. It was in circulation with occasional breaks until 1880, and edited in succession after Nathan Brown by Danforth, Whiting, Bronson, Mrs. Ward, Clark and A.K Garney. Brown was also a pioneer in

the unearthing of old manuscripts and in editing and publishing them. The singular most important contribution of Nathan Brown to the Assamese society was his struggle to restore the Assamese language as the court language as well as the medium of instruction in Assam, which was realized in 1873. With the establishment of the first printing press in Assam, Brown's arrival ushered in an era of literary development in the region. Brown also pioneered in establishing schools in different parts of the state. He established 14 Assamese medium schools in and around Sibsagar by 1846.

Brown was a linguist par excellence. A good number of his translated hymns are still sung in many churches in Assam. In 1848 he published, Grammatical Notes of the Assamese Language, which served as the first Assamese Grammar book. In the introduction of this book, he wrote, "For beauty and softness, the Assamese language is much superior to the Bengali", showing his keen love and appreciation of this language. Brown found that the Assamese Bible published by William Carey, which was in circulation at that time, was full of Bengali and Sanskrit terms, so it was idiomatically inadequate. Therefore, he undertook to translate the Bible and published the New Testament into pure and simple Assamese in 1848. Brown was also a pioneer in writing school books. He wrote books on elementary arithmetic called Pratham ganana (1845), Dutio ganana (1855) and geography called Bhugulor biboran (1851) which were much superior to Bengali books used in the schools at that time. He translated John Bunyan's famous Pilgrims Progress into Assamese. Brown's wife, Eliza, opened boarding school for girls. She was also actively involved in literary work. She translated a dozen tracts into Assamese and wrote arithmetic and story books for children.

Modern prose-style in Assamese literature to a great extent is credited to the work of Brown and other missionaries. The currently prevalent standard of Assamese has its roots in the language of Upper Assam, particularly of Sibsagar. Renowned Assamese litterateur Banikanta Kakoti notes, '*The missionaries made Sibsagar in Eastern Assam, the centre of their activities and used the dialect of Sibsagar for their literary purposes*'. Since the initial printing and literary activity occurred in Upper Assam, this language was introduced in schools, courts and offices and thus came to be formally recognized as the Standard Assamese. Therefore the language which the missionaries mastered, used and promoted through their literary works became the standard language in Assam.

Though, the contribution of missionaries in India evokes both appreciation and criticism, the effort of the Baptist Missionary in liberalization, preservation and modernization of the language, literature and culture of Assam deserves obeisance. Their contribution towards growth of Education in the state is acknowledged and mentioned with reverence by the people and historians who refer the Baptist Missionary period as 'a period of cultural progress' in Assam. Maheswar Neog, a great litterateur of Assam has stated thus:

"...but now in contact with English speaking people Assamese developed modern prose-style; and this should perhaps be considered the greatest contribution of the Baptists to Assamese literature and culture. The everyday language of the people

could now be the medium of literary expression, which now began to imbibe the qualities of English rhythm and syntax”.

The intervention of the missionaries, rather than threatening Assamese culture, liberalized and preserved it and helped in modernizing the language. Therefore, the historians have rightly termed the era of American Baptist Missionaries as ‘a period of cultural progress’ in Assam.

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