

Primary Education in Assam before Independence

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Abstract

The primary education is considered as an important factor which can play an important role for the development of a society. Primary education is a basic requirement for economic development, modernization of the social system and the smooth functioning of modern democratic institution. The modern primary education started in the British period of Assam. It is seen that the primary education was not developed as expected level before independence in Assam. Assam being a backward state, the primary education has an important role to play in the overall smooth development of the state. Primary schools have been established for fulfilling the obligation to provide for free and compulsory education to all children as stipulated after independence in Assam. The work is mainly concerned with the development of primary education before independence in Assam.

Key Words: Assam, Primary education, Primary school, British period, Missionaries, Assamese language.

Introduction:

Primary education is considered as an important factor which can play a significant role for the development of a society. Primary education has been defined in different ways. The term 'Primary Education' is understood as a basic stage of education

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which is either a self contained phase or which form a part of a longer cycle of general education of a person (Konwar, 2014). The primary education which he receives there provides the foundation of his physical, mental, emotional, intellectual, social and economic development. The sound primary education may lead to sound secondary education and higher education. Primary education deserves the highest priority not only ground of social justice but also for increasing overall national productivity of a country. It is to be noted that the primary education is a basic requirement for economic development, modernization of the social system and the smooth functioning of modern democratic institution. There has been significant positive impact of the access and quality of primary education on aggregate economic growth (Zutshi and Rai, 2013). The primary education constitutes very significant part of the entire structure of a person. The Anmol Dictionary of Education, primary education defined as "Education provided by a primary school or elementary school (Anmol Dictionary of Education, 1998). The Grolier Encyclopedia of Knowledge mentioned that primary education usually ends after 6 or 8 years of schooling, depending on the organization of the local school system (Grolier Encyclopedia of Knowledge, 1999). The primary education had been accepted as the starting point for promoting gender equality and empowering women in a society. The basic purpose of primary education is to offer children a pure foundation in the basics of a curriculum. It is a basic requirement for economic development, modernization of the social system and the smooth functioning of modern democratic institution. The quality of life of a person depends on the primary education and one gets from the state (Konwar, 2017). All developed nations provide public primary education for the young children in the world. Primary education is free in aided primary schools where children below the age of 11 taught in India. It also used the term lower primary stage or school where includes classes I to V. M. K. Gandhi was very dissatisfied with the condition of education prevailing during the British rule in India. For improving this condition he advocated a scheme for primary education which is popularly known as basic education scheme. His views of education helped to realize the value of the dignity labour and he wanted to break the differences between the urban and rural life (Sarma, 2012). In 1937 in October, a conference of national worker was called at Wardha under the presidentship of M. K. Gandhi to evolve a new system of education for India. The scheme is widely known as 'Basic scheme of education' or the 'Wardha scheme of education'. After that basic education has been adopted as our national system of education. Basic education, as

conceived and explained by Mahatma Gandhi, is essentially an education for life, and education through life. Primary schools have been established for fulfilling the obligation to provide for free and compulsory education to all children as stipulated under Article 45 of the Constitution of India. The SarvaShikshaAbhiyan has been started in Assam with rest of the country. Assam was the 19th state in India to have implemented the “Right to Education Act 2009” since it was passed in 2009. Assam being a backward state, the education has an important role to play in the overall smooth development of the state. It is seen that more than sixty five years of independence, the primary education in Assam are not developed as expected level.

In this work an attempt has been made to discuss about the history of primary education before independence in Assam. The growth of education system before British period in Assam is discussed in the first part. The part II is devoted to an analysis of primary education in the British period in Assam and part III draws the conclusion of the paper.

I

The history of education of Assam is as old as the land itself. The earlier kings of Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa were supported and advocated for the development of systematic system of education in ancient Assam. The students of Assam also admitted in the Nalanda and Takshasila universities which were world renowned institutions in ancient India. Education system in ancient Assam was closely linked with tradition, culture and religion. Indigenous system of education was arranged by the local kings and the village priests. Generally, village priests worked as astrologer imported education in the village which education was a part and parcel of day to day life of the people. In some rich people used to employ Brahmin teachers to teach and learn their children at home. Although education was not universal, as a matter of fact that the standard of education in ancient days was much more glorious than what we have today. This is evident from the fact that ancient Assam attracted many foreign scholars including Chinese traveler HiuenTsiang who visited the capital of BhaskaraVarman in about 643 AD in Kamrup for studying different branches of learning (Gait,1997). Assam had its contact with other parts of India regarding teaching and learning. HiuenTsiang rightly mentioned that king was fond of learning and ‘men of abilities came from far to study here’ (Barua, 2003). The earliest ruler of Kamrupa was called MahirangDanab. The

most powerful monarch of the Varmans dynasty was Bhaskaravarman and the Varmans were followed by the rulers of the Salastambha dynasty and Pala dynasty. Pala dynasty held power till the beginning of the 12th century in Kamarupa. It is obvious that the kings of all dynasties were interested and supported for the education and learning. The local kings made large grants for that purpose in ancient Assam.

After the fall of the early kingdom of Kamarupa, a few tribal states began to be formed in different parts of the Assam. Before the advent of the Ahoms belonging to the Tai-Shan family, the present Assam was divided into different kingdoms. The Ahom came to Assam in 1228 and they were the rulers from 1228 to 1826 A.D. in Assam. The Koch, Kachari and Chutia kings ruled a good part for a considerable time of the present Assam. So far as education in medieval Assam is concerned, S.N.Sarma writes, "Education was mainly manned by private individuals and concerns, but royal patronage was occasionally extended to scholars for their erudition and contribution towards dissemination of learning (Sarma, 2001). The Ahom kings encouraged and supported for education. It was also true that during the Ahom periods, there was no organized system of primary education. The Ahom kings patronized a system of education known as the Gurukula system. The indigenous institutions like *Pathsalas* for Hindus, *Maktabs* and *Madrassahs* for Muslims, *Tols* for Brahmins and *Satras* for Vaisnavas were found in this period. The *Pathsalas* were just like of the elementary schools in medieval period. There were no printed books and buildings. The day of working were adjusted to the local needs of society. The size of the school and student were generally small and teacher was held in high esteem by the people of society. There was also professional or craft education which were family tradition and skill. In this education system, a son of artisan automatically becomes an artisan and this tradition continued generation after generation. The king made *khel* system, specifying a particular profession in the kingdom. In order to bring about stability in craft education the Ahom kings in many occasion, establishment different traditional artisans at different places in medieval period. The Ahom king PratapSinha brought artisan from Koch Behar and his successor king RudraSinha brought artisan from Banares to teach new technique and design to the Assamese artisans. The *Deodhais*, the *Hohans* and the *Bailungs* were the priestly classes and they also contributed to the cause of teaching and learning through their study of Astrology and traditional religious books. King RudraSinha (1696-1714) established a number of schools in various places of his state. Queen Phuleshwari of wife of Siva Singha (1714-1744) established

also school in her kingdom(Konwar, 2015).

The social history of Assam took a new turn in the closing decades of the fifteenth century. Sankaradeva developed the New-vaisnavite movement and his idea was to propagate a simple system of religion based on devotion and faith in medieval period. Sankaradeva was not interested on a philosophy of religion, for he knew that the society was more in need of a reformation than a system of philosophy. The new-Vaisnavite writers of the 15th and 16th centuries have rendered the teaching and learning of religious and spiritual education where AnantaKandali, Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva were popular scholars in these fields. The *Satrainstitution* also contributed to the development of teaching and learning in Assam. There was no restriction to establish schools for the teaching of the Islamic education in the Ahom periods. There were about 10 or 12 schools around Guwahati and Sivasagar exclusively for imparting Muslim education. In such types of schools went up to 20 during the later part of the Ahom kingdom. Ambitious students admitted outside the state for acquiring the higher education in different branches of Sanskrit learning and teaching. In Koch kingdom, Naranarayana and Cilaraya went to Baranasi for higher learning. Regarding the education in the pre-British days, Hem Barua writes, "Education in the Pre-British days was a concern of the Vaishnava monasteries, Sanskrit *tolas* and *guru-grihas*. As a natural fact the education of this period was mostly ritualistic; the masses were far beyond the pale of it. The strictly vocational or scientific character of education did not and could not develop then" (Barua, 1991). The education for women remained neglected like other part of India in medieval period of Assam. But women received learning from their husbands and relatives who regularly had to attend the lectures on scriptures at the *namghars* and *satras* in that period. As per *CharitaPuthis*, Kanaklata, granddaughter in-law of saint Sankaradeva was well known learning women in medieval Assam. However, the entire education system followed the caste and hereditary lines in medieval Assam. Historical records also testify that the tradition of patronage teaching and learning from local royal courts was continued up to the end of Ahom dynasty in Assam. It is to be noted that the economic characteristic was no plenty, no scarcity in the Ahom period. It was a tragedy for the Assamese people that this economic characteristic was destroyed in the last part of Ahom period.

II

The people of Assam feel proud that despite numerous invasions, no western

power ruled Assam until the arrival of British people. History tells us that Assam maintained her independent status till the treaty of Yandabo in 1826. After 1826, the British rule brought significant changes in the society and economy in Assam. According to Priyam Goswami, "British occupation of Assam inaugurated an era of remarkable changes. The transition from the old order to the new was swift and was characterized by a complete overhauling of the administrative machinery that heralded far reaching political, economic and social changes in Assam" (Goswami, 2007). In Assam, the history of modern primary education started with the annexation of Assam with the British Empire in accordance with the treaty of Yandabo in 1826. The social, political and economic scenario was unstable in the time of annexation of Assam with British Empire. David Scott, the first agent of the East India Company, tried to improve and develop the indigenous system of education soon after his arrival in 1826 in Assam. Scott got the sanction of the government of West Bengal to set up primary school in Assam. David Scott started 11 schools to win over the confidence of Assamese people which were started in mostly in lower Assam. Scott started a school in GaroHills for expansion of primary education for tribal people and these students which were passed from these schools were offered jobs under government. In 1838, the Collector of Guwahati prepared a scheme of village education which scheme was not accepted by the General Committee of Public Instruction at Calcutta (Saikia, 1998). The British government was given less importance for educational development in that time. Gradually, British government had taken some initiative to improve the education scenario and W. Robinson was appointed as the first Inspector of schools in 1840.

After the recommendations of the Wood's Despatch of 1854, indigenous primary schools received grants-in-aid. This grant-in-aid system also helped the development of primary education in Assam. The number of pupils receiving instruction in primary schools was 750 in Sivasagar and 600 in Kamrup in 1857-58. The British people wanted to imparting English education after allowing the indigenous system of education in Assam. Assamese students of traditional Brahman families were seen gradually studying English side by side with pupils of other communities. Side by side, with this activities of the company, the Christian Missionaries also started primary schools in their religious interests. The Missionaries were pioneers to open schools for the education of the children of the land. In the early half of the 19th century, the American Baptist Mission who extended educational activities and they encouraged the study of both English and

Assamese in their educational institutions. Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter established a school at Sadiya in 1837. The Missionaries opened nearly 14 schools in Sivasagar, 3 in Nowgong and 5 in Kamrup with an average attendance of 347 students in 1845 (Baruah, 2013). The Missionaries work in this respect was most commendable in the hill areas. Welsh Presbyterian Mission started work for education in Khasi-JaintiaHills. The Presbyterian Lower Primary School, Jowai established in 1854 was the first elementary school in the Jaintia Hills(Passah, 2004). In addition to these, they were worked amongst the backward classes which were neglected by the government rightly or wrongly. The government run schools were on religious education as compared to Missionary schools. The Welsh Missionaries also started many primary schools in hill areas. The education for girls in Assam was sadly neglected. Although common people hesitated in the early days of the Company for girls education, but the first primary school for girls was started in upper Assam by Utsabananda Goswami, Deputy Inspector of School. But, the Missionaries encouraged the female education in both hills and plains. The British government was decided in making the Bengalee language the medium of instruction in the schools and the court in 1836. Needless to say, this decision also adversely affected the progress of primary education in Assam. Fortunately, the Assamese language was again used in the primary schools only from 1873. It is another fact that the missionary schools imparted instruction through the Assamese language or the mother-tongue to the pupils in Assam. The British formed the Assam province 1873. The Shillong was made the capital of Assam in 1874. A new outlook was observed for the development of primary education from 1874. But in 1882, the Hunter Commission opined the transfer of primary schools to the local authorities and introduced the system of 'payment by result' in offering grants to schools which attempt was adversely affected the expansion of primary education in Assam. In spite of this, at the end of the century the numbers of primary schools rose in Assam. The number of primary schools increased from 2800 to 3534 with a corresponding increase in the number of students from 8300 to 103541 during the period of 1897 to 1902 in Assam(Barpujari, ed., 2007). By the end of the 19th century, a new wave of liberal and nationalist ideas reached different fields of the people and gave momentum to the social, political and economic movements making the dawn of a new era in Assam.

In 1901, the literacy rate was 4.20 percent in Assam. The Cotton collage and the Digboi Refinery were established in 1901 which were an important event in Assam. In

order to boost the growth and development, the Department of Education was created in 1905. After the announcement of the partition of Bengali in 1905, the increasing spirit of national consciousness found among the educated young men in Assam. The liberal and nationalist leaders were in favored of the expansion of primary education. After 1910, Gokhale wanted to convince the government the need of compulsory primary education in India which also helped further expansion of primary education in Assam. The Indian nationalists' movement led to the passing of the Compulsory Primary Education Act in 1911. The education was transferred to the Indian Ministers in accordance with the Government of India Act of 1919. Accordingly, the government of Assam wanted to make primary education compulsory through the Local Boards and the Municipalities in gradual stages in the state. The government of Assam passed the Primary Education Act in 1926 which was the First Primary Education Act for making primary education compulsory in Assam. The Act 1926, extended to the entire areas of Assam and the Act provided for easy setting up primary schools for children between 6-11 years of age in the entire province of Assam (Coudhury and Dutta, 2013). Although, this Act was a milestone in the history of the primary education in British period, but the Act was not enforced on financial ground in Assam. There were certain shortfalls in the Act regarding the policy of the government of grant-in-aid for the extension of primary education. The total number of primary schools in 1921, 1927, 1932 and 1937 were 4109, 4619, 5354 and 6795 respectively in Assam (Barua, 2005). After the enforcement of the Government of India Act 1935, the Congress Ministry under Gopinath Bardoloi took some positive measure for the development of primary education. During the Second World War (1939-1945), the school education including primary education suffered military movements in Assam. It was during the period that the decrease in government expenditure on education adversely affected the entire academic scenario in the state. Most of the primary schools were not run properly during the war period. For the spread of primary education the colonial rulers were motivated by a political and official objective in Assam. The government has taken various steps for the expansion of primary education after 1947 in Assam.

III

It is quite clear that although the government was taken some measure, the pace of expansion of primary education during the pre-independence days was very slow in

Assam.Education, which has always been an essential and integral part of Assamese society, got a fillip with the emergence of the Assamese middle class. It was fortunate matter that the nationalists realized and stressed the importance of primary education in the colonial period of Assam. In spite of making some efforts, dropout was one of major problem in the state. The old tradition of single teacher, inadequate building and low enrolment were existed in the primary level schools. There was some noticeable disparity in development of primary level education among the districts in colonial Assam. The entire province of Assam was home to diverse ethnic and racial stocks of people faced challenges in expanding primary education before independence period.

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