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## Development of primary education in Assam prior to Indian independence

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### Abstract

Primary education is a critical component of the educational system as a whole. The formal education of the child begins at this point. It is the foundation of the educational system. This stage of education is responsible for the widespread adoption of literacy. Mass literacy is a prerequisite for the economic development, social structure, modernization, and the efficient operation of democratic institutions. As a result, primary education should be given top priority in raising average worker capability and growing national efficiency. This paper aims to identify the development of primary education in Assam prior to independence. It aims at comprehending the evolution of primary education in Assam from the pre-independence period. All children up to the age of 14 years are enabled to receive free and compulsory education under the Indian Constitution. It also supports us in realizing the various measures taken from time to time to carry out Article 45 of our constitution's directive.

Keywords – Primary education, national productivity

### Introduction:

The history of the development of primary education can be traced back into the beginning of the Rig Vedic period where the Hindu system of education prevailed in India. The importance of education was not felt until the society was in need of it. There was no system of formal education in the community, but in fact it was also not totally absent. There existed an informal system of education through life's experiences, the morals and

teachings passed on from parents to children and the generations to come. A study of the history of primary education in India is not encouraging at all, prior to the British system of education in the country there was the indigenous primary education system prevalent among the mass people. Sources of information on the subject may be had from the study made in Madras Presidency by Sir Thomas Munroe in 1822, in Bombay Presidency by Mountstuart Elphinstone in 1823 and in Bengal Presidency by William Adam in 1835. Their reports throw light on the state and condition of indigenous primary education in the country prior to the British rule.

So far as the state of Assam is concerned it should be mentioned here that at the Treaty of Yandaboo, 24 February 1826, His Majesty, the King of Ava, surrendered, amongst others, his sovereignty over Assam, Cachar and Manipur to the East India Company. David Scott, the Agent to the Governor-General, North-East Frontier, left the indigenous system undisturbed and continued to make grant of lands to the institutions like the former Government. In early 1826, with the approval of Government of Bengal, he made additional grants for the establishment of several indigenous schools in Upper and Lower Assam. Accordingly in September 1826, eleven schools were established in each station of Gauhati, Nilachal, Patte Darrang, Hajo, Bijali, Silah, Bishwanath, Dharampore, Patte Darrang. Within a few months, the number of schools rose to sixteen by the addition of schools in Gauhati, Behnaje, Dharampore, Patte Darrang and Boreegoge. In 1831, Adam White started an elementary school at Gauhati. Instructions in this institution particularly in Elementary English work in science was much appreciated as this was the need of the hour; the traditional learning, according to the official view, had nothing to do with the training in the art of new administration.

In April 1832, T. C. Robertson succeeded Scott as Agent to the Governor-General. He planned to start a number of institutions with the aid of the Moravians who were expected to be readily available. The main object of the institution was to disseminate the Moravian method of teaching amongst the people particularly those ordinary crafts, such as, carpentry and smothery that were then not known to the local people. In the general department of this institution useful knowledge on a Christian basis might be imparted to a limited to a limited number of pupils who, in process of time, might become instrumental towards the advancement of the great masses of people and would preferably be absorbed in Government services.

In early 1834, Captain Francis Jenkins became the Agent to the Governor-General, North-East Frontier and Commissioner of Assam. He drew up a scheme of educating a few Assamese boys in Calcutta; for he felt, the acquisitions they would bring back with them would attract the upper classes of the society who would gradually perceive the necessity of the attainment of English education. He pointed out to the Government of Bengal that in a backward state like Assam instruction should be the concern of the Government alone because most of the people were not in the position to take the responsibility of education as they were universally poor and incapable of judging themselves. He proposed to start a few schools to impart English education in each station Goalpara, Gauhati, Darrang, Nowgong, and Bishwanath and to place them under the superintendence of European residents. In the initial stage, teachers' capable instructions in Bengali and English would have to be

procured from the neighboring districts of Bengal; and later local teachers would certainly be available from those pupils who would come out successful in future from those institutions.

On July 1823, a General Committee of Public Instruction was constituted for the Presidency of Bengal. Before long, a controversy arose amongst the members of the Committee as to the nature, medium and agency for the spread of education. Some favored the continuance of the classical languages, while others advocated the promotion of useful knowledge through the medium of English. As regards the agency, the former believed in what is known as the 'Downward Filtration Theory' under which education was to spread from the upper to lower stratum in the society but the latter had little faith in such a theory in a backward country like India and suggested that the state should take direct responsibility of educating the people. Since both the groups were equal in strength, the controversy dragged on for three years. Ultimately on 7<sup>th</sup> March 1835 Lord William Bentick, the Governor-General of India, resolved upon the promotion of European literature and science amongst the people through the medium of English language. In June 1835, the Committee recommended the establishment of an English school at Gauhati; and in July it appointed Mr. Singer as its Head Master on a salary of rupees one hundred and fifty per month.

**Adam's Report of 1835:** William Bentinck then Governor General of Bengal had entrusted William Adam, a non-official Missionary with the task of making a survey on the prevailing indigenous elementary education. According to his description the indigenous elementary schools were that where elementary knowledge was given to the native children. They were organized and supported by the native people of the locality themselves. Although it may be observed that, "In those days the word 'School' was used to mean a place where instruction was given and included centres where the system of democratic instruction prevailed." It was apparent that in every village there was a school.

Meanwhile, in 1837, Lieutenant Bogle, the Collector of Kamrup, emphasized the importance of vernacular education in Assam. He urged on the introduction of vernacular education by which all kinds of useful information could be attained easily by the people at mass scale. He also added that there would be also a desire for English education that would act as the proper channel of all higher branches of knowledge. Therefore, the Supreme Government sanctioned in 1837, an amount of rupees sixty-four for the establishment of vernacular schools in Darrang, Chatgaree and Tezpur.

James Matthie, succeeded Bogle as the collector of Kamrup in 1838, to spread out mass education in the rural areas. Patta system was introduced in Kamrup, and the villagers in order to be not deceived by the amlahs, felt the need of rudimentary knowledge of the Three R's through vernacular schools. Matthie developed a plan for mass education on the representation made by a number of village headmen. Firstly, he sought to open a branch of Anglo-Vernacular School at Dharampore, secondly, several other vernacular schools in mofussil area. In his letter of 13<sup>th</sup> February 1838, to the Commissioner of Assam, Matthie proposed the immediate establishment of this school particularly for the benefit of the children of the areas remote from the Sadar station.

He also wanted to establish twenty-one Mofussil (village) Vernacular Schools for the instruction of the masses through the medium of both Assamese and Bengali in the principal parganas of Kamrup at a cost of rupees seventy-nine per month. Matthie proposed that in these schools and little beyond the rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic would be taught to the young pupils.

Educationists like Thomas Munro, Mounstuart Elphinstone and William Adam supported Matthie's plan. The General Committee of Public Instruction anticipated that the establishment of a well-regulated institution at Gauhati would gradually produce a class of people acquainted with English literature and science. Fortunately, on the strong recommendation of Mr. Ross the then President in Council, Matthie's plan for village schools received the approval of the Government as an 'experimental measure' on condition that its continuance in future would be determined on the results of school examinations. The scheme relating to the establishment of Anglo-Vernacular school was, however, dropped on the ground that the efforts of the Government schools should only be directed towards the improvement of the Gauhati School rather than the establishment of many schools of inferior grades. Accordingly, in August 1838, the Commissioner established twenty-one village schools in the district of Kamrup. The growing demand for such institutions compelled the Government to sanction two more schools in Luckimpore three in Darrand and four in Nowgong.

The demand for the English education increased when they were given public services. Towards the end of 1839, two Bengali medium branch schools were set up, one at Nilachal and another at Pandu near Gauhati entirely at public cost. Even these could hardly meet the demands of people. So as to cater to their demand, additional branch schools were started in Beltala and Amingaon in 1840; and one in North Gauhati in 1841. Sibsagar being too far from Gauhati, an Anglo-Vernacular school was started at that station in February, 1841, with D'Souza as its Head Master and Ramsagar as Assistant Head Master and Urbidhar Sarma as Pundit.

Indigenous schools prevailing during the 19<sup>th</sup> century may be broadly divided into three categories. They were-

- (a) Schools of learning
- (b) Elementary Schools
- (c) Private or family institutions

Their nature, characteristics and functions may be described below:

- (a) **Schools of Learning:** This category of schools included the Pathshalas of the Hindu and Maqtabs and Madrassas of the Muslims. These schools were mostly situated in the temples and in the Masjids respectively. The schools were run by the contributions made by the rulers, rich and religious persons of the locality. The royal authority did not interfere in the affairs of these schools. The teachers received low remuneration. The main objective of these schools was to create the Pundits and Maulabies in the society who might undertake in intellectual activities later.

- (b) **Elementary Schools:** This category of schools was meant for serving the socio-economic needs of the common people. They used to run from the donations collected. In the absence of its own school building, they used to be held in the varendra of the house of the landlords and sometimes under the shades of the trees. There was no regular academic session and the students used to get admission at any time in school. The famous Monitorial system had originated from these types of schools.
- (c) **Private or family institutions:** The third category of indigenous schools were confined to the family of the high-class people in the society. They include the royal administrative family, the landlords and the business. The main objective was to make their sons and daughters true inheritors of the family tradition and culture.

### **Types of Indigenous Schools:**

There are certain indigenous types of educational institutions even today catering to the needs of the rural community people. Their nature, activity and functions may be summarized below.

- (1) **Gurukula System:** Vedic system that gives education to students in Guru's house is known as Gurukula system. The Guru or the teacher used to organize, control and manage all the affairs of this education in his family situation for which the system itself is known as 'Gurukula'. It was thought at that time that education cannot be attained in the midst of emotional situation of love and affection in the family life of the students. It can be had away from home in the serene atmosphere of 'Asrama' of the Guru. After completion of primary education, the student was to enter into the 'Guru griha' at the age of 12 years. In the Rig Vedic period, the Gurus taught the students Vedic sutras and the legends of heroes. The sutras of the Rig-Veda were composed by the poets of that period.
- (2) **Monastery:** Parallel to the system of Gurukula in Vedic education, there had been the Buddhist system of education known as Monastery, Sangha or Bihara. Its method of organization and management were basically different from that of Gurukula. The Buddhist Monasteries were the centers of social, religious and educational institutions organized and administered by the people for promotion of Buddhist culture. The major objective of this education was to get 'Nirvana' or emancipation from earthly miseries and sufferings of life. Education was in quest of eternal peace of mind and soul.
- (3) **Monitorial System:** In the indigenous system of Vedic and Muslim education there was the process of teaching the junior students in the absence of the teacher. It was later known as Monitorial system.
- (4) **Pathshalas:** Popular institutions of indigenous education for the Hindus are the Pathshalas. Here the children of the common people were able to satisfy their personal and social needs of education. Simple living and high thinking were the major objective of education.
- (5) **Satras:** Under the leadership of Srimanta Sankardeb and Madhabdev socio-cultural revolution was initiated throughout the whole of Assam during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Satras used to act as the centres of this revolution. Satras are the socio-cultural centres of education based on religious and spiritual sentiment. A Satra is maintained and administered by its leader called 'Satradhikar'. The common people used to make religious submission to him. They get necessary training and instruction from him for living

their controlled moral and spiritual way of life. Even today there is provision for education of the Satras to people who submit to the Satradhikar for living an ideal life. From authoritative sources it has been learnt that there are at present as many as 846 Govt. registered Satras in Assam working for the cause of education and culture in the state. The famous Madhupur Satra is there at Koch Behar even in outside the state.

The Ahom Kings during the 16<sup>th</sup> century had donated land for establishment of the Satras to develop Vaishnava religion and culture. Through such step the royal authority had indirectly taken the initiative in the spread of education, religion and culture among the mass people. Sanskrit Tols were established in the Satras for spread of higher education also. The religious disciples used to get education and instruction under the Satradhikar for living the ideal life of Vaishnava. They learnt simplicity, nobility, sincerity, obedience, tolerance and other moral values under the 'guru'.

The Satras are still working as centers of cultural training in devotional songs and dance popularly known as 'Satriya Nrityageet'. There is a provision for training in instrumental music, dramatization, art and painting. They have been keeping up the cultural tradition of the great saints of Vaishnava movement throughout the ages. The Satras are bringing the Assamese society together in common platform of religion and culture.

- (6) **Namghar:** 'Namghar' literally goes to mean 'house of prayer'. In the villages and in the interior areas of Assam Namghars have continued to work as the centre of religion, culture and education. Establishment of a Namghar has been considered indispensable for every village community. It serves the need of spiritual and cultural hopes and aspirations of the Assamese people. The Namghar acts as a branch of Satra in promoting the principles of Vaishnava way of life. The broad principle of 'Namdharma' or 'religion of prayer' formulated by Sankardeva has been practically worked out at its grassroot level through the Namghar.

Apart from its religious objective Namghar has been able to make the Assamese people cultural minded and community conscious. It acts as the adult or social education centre organized and managed by the people themselves. The illiterate men and women also learn here regularly by listening to recitation, discussion and interpretation of the great epics 'Kirtan' and 'Bhagawat'. There is the system of presentation of the dramatic shows called 'Bhaona' organized in the premises of Namghar, the story of which are based on the great epics of 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata'. All sorts of community ritual, feasts and festivals used to be celebrated in the Namghar with great solemnity by the community people. Thus, it acts as the Community Development Centre of the Assamese society even to the people of the most remote areas of the state. Sankardeva had in fact designed Namghar as the social education centre or Community Development Centre for the people of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Assam.

(7) **Maqtab:** Muslim system of indigenous primary education is known as Maqtab. It was religious compulsion for the Muslim community to send their children to the Maqtab for education. Major objective of its education was to give elementary knowledge of reading and writing. The word 'Maqtab' has been derived from Arabic word 'qatab' which means 'place where training is given for writing'.

The Resolution of 11<sup>th</sup> October 1844 of Lord Hardinge, the Governor-General of India, laid that even in the selection of persons fill the lowest offices under the Government due consideration should be given to those who could read and write. Though the resolution did not clearly mention whether men with English education were to be preferred for Government employment, the effect was in favor of the English-educated people in other parts of India. In Assam the resolution had its effect more in the expansion of the vernacular than in that of English education. The local authorities thought that in the backward state of Assam, it would be not possible to improve English education and hence they resolved that vernacular schools should not only be the promotion of education in Assam. This effected in immediate appointment of a post of Inspector of schools whose main duties were to recommend the establishment of additional schools, where required, to persuade the inhabitants to send their children to the schools to carry out the view of Government in diffusing throughout the state a sound and gradually-improving system of education in the indigenous languages. William Robinson, the Head master of the Gauhati school was selected for the new post of the Inspector in the Eastern Circle. With the decline of the average attendance of Sibsagar School, in 1844, it was decided by the Government to close the English Department which resulted in renaming all the branch schools as vernacular schools. In June 1847, eight Government village schools were sanctioned in Goalpara, six in the district of Darrang, three in Luckimpore, two in Kamrup and two in Nowgong. Thus, the total number of schools in 1843-44 were fifty, in 1846-47 it increased to seventy-one. In 1852, the number rose to seventy-four, of these twenty-six were in Kamrup, ten in Goalpara, five in Luckimpore, thirteen in Nowgong and nine in each of the districts of Sibsagar and Darrang.

Apparently, there was a steady increase in the number of schools but the number was insignificant compared with the total population of the province. The main obstacles, which stood in the progress of education in Assam were not far to seek. The province being an agricultural one, the common people had a general apathy towards education; their general idea was that there was no advantage to be derived from the establishment of schools and they could not spare their children from their agricultural labour which was more important to them than education. Often, they remarked: "We want the hands more than the heads of our children, in order to get food to fill our mouths". Secondly, the general poverty of the people was also the stumbling block in the progress of education. It was expected that the Government should bear the expense of maintaining the schools. Consequently, the few Government schools could do but little towards the promotion of mass education. Thirdly, up to the first half of the nineteenth century, only the populous and easily accessible parts of Assam were selected for the establishment of schools and the outlying areas were not brought under consideration. Fourthly, the indifference of the influential classes of Assam were, to a great extent, responsible for the slow progress of education. Fifthly, the desire for instruction being based on no correct idea of its value was unstable and

inconsistent. The motive, which brought the boys to schools was simply the prospect of getting Government employment.

The Government of Bengal deputed Mr. A. J. Moffat Mills in 1853 to institute a closer and detailed enquiry about the local administration in Assam. One of the many areas which he was directed to ascertain was the probable motive of the locals which led them to send their children to school. He noticed that the principal stimulus to education was an attraction towards Government service. Then Andaram Dhekial Phukan, the Sub-Assistant of Nowgong and an eminent Assamese of the age suggested creating separate department for the study of Sanskrit in the several vernacular schools.

**Educational contributions of Early Missionaries in Assam:** Everywhere in India, the Christian Missionaries are mainly inspired by a proselytizing spirit. However, the contribution made by them was unique. During the reign of the Mughal Empire the trading companies from the European countries had started coming to India. The Portuguese had come at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Gradual development of their trade and commerce had opened up their mind to occupy more territory of this country. The Portuguese and the British were in this respect, more successful.

They began to establish a number of primary schools called 'Charity Schools'. Assam means not the Assam of today, but the Assam of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which included Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. In April 1834, Francis Jenkins arrived at Guwahati as the Commissioner and Agent to the Governor-General for Assam and North-East. Early 1835, he invited the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society of Calcutta with the objective of pacifying the frontier tribes, particularly the Khamtis and the Singphos. The Baptist Society took the matter in right earnest and despatched a mission under Reverend Nathan Brown and Reverend Oliver Cutter with a printing press which arrived at Sadiya in March, 1836. On 6<sup>th</sup> January 1837, Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter started a school at Sadiya; within a week twenty pupils enrolled themselves and their enthusiasm was really astonishing. The American Baptist Missionaries started by 1845 three schools in Nowgong, five in Kamrup and fourteen in Sibsagar with an average attendance of 347 students. In Khasi-Jaintia Hills (now Meghalaya), the Welsh Missionaries established about a dozen schools.

In those days, lessons were imparted generally in village schools of Assam in Bengali while at the sadar schools there were two independent departments- English and Bengali. The missionaries, on the other hand, preferred Assamese to English as medium of instruction and for this they learned the regional language, translated English works into vernacular and published books for the use of the students. They also wrote grammar, dictionaries and other useful books.

The work of Brown and Cutter was followed by Miles Bronson, who commenced his work among the Nagas at Namsng near Jaypur. On grounds of health Bronson left the Nagas and settled at Nowgong where he baptized the first Assamese convert Nidhiram, later known as Didhi Levi Farewell. Bronson, Brown and Nidhi Levi, *the trio*, laid the foundation of the modern Assamese language by writing books on grammar and dictionaries. Miles Bronson's monumental work *Dictionary in Assamese and English* was published from the Serampore Press in



1876, the earliest of its kind till 1990. Nathan Brown published in 1848 his *Grammatical Notice of the Assamese language*. The crowning achievement of the missionaries in Assam was the publication of the *Arunodoi*, the first Assamese monthly devoted to religion, science and general intelligence. First published in January 1846, and continued with occasional breaks until 1882, *Arunodoi* disseminated Western thought and learning. It only inspired the younger generation, but also paved the way for an intellectual awakening in Assam.

Hemchandra Baruah (1835-96), Gunabhiram Baruah (1835-97) and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1829-59) – “*The Trinity*” – laid the foundation of modern Assamese language and literature on a solid basis in those days.

### **Primary Education in Assam during the British Period:**

Assam came under the East India Company by the Treaty of Yandaboo, 24 February 1826. The educational institutions which survived the Burmese ravages were continued to be controlled by the priestly classes who had also exercised considerable influence over the masses. At that time, because of the weak Ahom rule and because of the plunder and devastation by the Burmese, Assam was in a pitiable state, its educational institutions were not functioning well. David Scott, the Agent to the Governor General, North East Frontier, established, with the approval of the Government of India, eleven primary schools by assignment of lands mostly in Lower Assam.

In April 1834, Francis Jenkins came as the Commissioner and Agent to the Governor-General for Assam and North East of Rangpur. Jenkins was alarmed at the sight of non-Assamese in almost all the government office. He realized that the natives of the soil must be relied on and that it was up to the government to train them up to take up positions of trust and responsibility. As a result of the proposal to the Government, the General Committee of Public Instruction accorded its approval in June 1835 for the establishment of an English School at Gauhati. For the education of the sons of the Ahom royal family, another English school was started at Sibsagar in 1942 with Mr. D. S'ouza as its Headmaster.

The enlightened section of the society showed their eagerness to get their sons educated and many of them became patrons of education. The increasing demand for English education led to the opening of a number of branch schools. These schools were established in the neighborhood of Gauhati- Pandu, Kamakhya, Beltola, Amingaon and North-Gauhati, and established entirely at public expense.

From 1837 onward, schools were established in Upper Assam by the missionaries, especially Nathan Brown, and Oliver Cutter. The Wood's Despatch of 1854, laid stress on education of Women and consequently the first government primary school for girls was opened in 1860-61 at Sibsagar. This was followed in the next two years by the establishment of similar schools at Gauhati and Nowgong. Wood's Despatch also brought into being a number of High Schools, Middle Schools and Primary Schools.

## 1. Department of Education

In 1874, Assam was taken away from Bengal and made a separate province under a *Chief Commissioner* who was directly under the Governor- General-in-Council. The first Chief Commissioner of Assam was R. H. Keatinge. In the same year, a *Department of Education* was established in Assam, and as a result, the condition of the schools began to improve. Under the Department of Education, the post of *Director of Public Schools*, 9 *Deputy Inspectors* and 12 *Sub-inspectors*.

According to the recommendations of *Indian Education Commission* (1882), the responsibility of supervision and expansion of primary education was given to the local bodies. In Assam also the responsibility of primary education was given to the Local Boards and the Municipalities.

Consequent upon *Gokhale's Bill* of 1911 and the *Educational Policy of Government of 1913*, many primary schools were established in different provinces of the country. In Assam also the number of primary schools substantially increased during this time.

## 2. Primary Education Act, Assam, 1926

The Primary Education Act was passed in Assam in 1926. It was prepared by incorporating into it many useful clauses. But, unfortunately, nowhere in Assam were the clauses of this Act translated into action. The following were the main provisions of the Act:

- i. This Act will be effective throughout the province.
- ii. Two-third majority of any local authority may apply for sanction regarding introduction of compulsory education in there are for children (of either sex) in the age-group of 6 to 11 years. The Government will accordingly send their approval.
- iii. The local authority (Local Boards and Municipalities) shall have to bear one-third of the cost of compulsory primary education. The other two-third of the cost will be borne by the Government.
- iv. No fees shall be charged from any pupil for tuition in any recognized primary school maintained or aided by the local authority.
- v. If a local authority fails to introduce compulsory primary education within a reasonable time, the Government may at any time call upon the local authority to submit necessary scheme.
- vi. The local authority shall provide necessary books and writing materials to the poor students of their area.
- vii. The local authority shall be responsible for the enforcement of the provisions of the Act and shall provide and maintain school accommodation and equipment. The Director of Public Instruction shall be responsible for appointment of teachers.

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 whole province of Assam was home to various traditional and cultural stocks of people confronted challenges in increasing primary education before independence period.

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