

The Growth of Colleges in Assam and its Impact on the Development of Higher Education

Rajib Handique

The role of colleges in the higher education system in any country is very important. In Assam, the proliferation of colleges in remote and rural areas has made higher education accessible to the masses. The contributions of the colleges both in terms of quality and quantity are significant, though the need of changes in tune with time is urgently felt.

I

Colleges in the Hierarchy

Higher education refers to education in post higher secondary institutions, colleges and universities. Formal arrangements for the education of individuals in the present day societies are conceived in terms of stages arranged in a hierarchy. The education system in Assam as well as in the other states of the country comprises the elementary, secondary, higher secondary and higher education stages. Adoption of the 10+2+3 pattern of education was first recommended by the Calcutta University Commission (1917-1919).¹ After the approval of the National Policy on Education in 1968 by the Indian Parliament, India is committed to an education structure symbolically referred to as the 10+2+3 structure. This means ten years high school education including five years of primary, three years of upper primary and two years higher secondary and three years of colleges or university education culminating in the Bachelor's degree. The new National Policy on Education of 1986 reaffirms the 10+2+3 structure and most of the Indian states have adopted this structure.²

Thus, higher education begins after the 10+2 stage and in Assam the colleges mainly impart the '+3' stage of education, though it must be stated that these colleges have also been imparting education in the '+2' stage, as constrained by the policy of the state government.

Higher education is so called primarily because it constitutes the top most stage of formal education and more importantly because it is concerned with processes in the more advanced phases of human learning. The entrants (students) are generally about eighteen years of age and therefore they are considered to be mentally mature and capable of performing in the abstract level. They are also considered capable to analyse, synthesise and grasp concepts and ideas of all kinds. Their creative faculties are also developed adequately.

Thus, the First Degree level of education or the post higher secondary stage of education, which is imparted by the colleges mainly in Assam, constitutes a very important stage of higher education and is linked up directly with the university.

II

The Growth of Colleges

In Assam, Colleges have been playing a pivotal role in the higher education system. However, students from Assam had to proceed to Calcutta (now called Kolkata) for higher education till the establishment of Cotton College at Guwahati in 1901.³ Several other colleges were also established in the major towns prior to independence of the country.⁴ The number of colleges has increased several times since independence and these centres of higher education have proliferated to rural and remote areas, spreading the light of higher education. In the process, access to higher education has become easy for the masses and a bachelor's degree has come to be regarded almost as a basic degree. The number of graduates have therefore increased several times since independence.

There are several important parameters in the growth and development of colleges in Assam, which are noteworthy (see Table I and Table II). The trends as revealed by the tables are quite conspicuous and even a sizeable margin of error would also not change the trends easily.

Thus, it is perceived that the number of colleges has increased significantly since the 1960s and has maintained a steady growth. The demand for higher education becomes quite obvious if we consider the increase in the number of colleges. Moreover, with the passage of time,

Table I
Growth of Colleges in Assam

Years	No of Colleges	Colleges Offering												
		B.A.	B.Sc.	B.Com.	U.B.	B.Ed.	MBBS	B.E.	M.E.	M.C.A.	M.A.	M.Sc.	Others	
Pre 1940s	7	6	6	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	1	-
1940s	11	7	7	1	1	-	2	-	-	-	-	1	1	1 (B.A.M.S)
1950s	15	13	12	4	-	-	-	1	1	1	1	1	2	-
1960s	72	57	23	15	5	3	1	2	-	1	1	1	1	-
1970s	77	60	20	11	10	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1980s	73	64	5	8	3	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
1990s	74	53	4	4	-	15	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-
Total	329	260	77	44	20	21	3	3	1	2	5	5	5	1

*Database - 'Universities Handbook', 29th Edition, Association of Indian Universities, New Delhi, January 2002

Table II

Establishment of Colleges in Assam and their Location*

Year	No. of Colleges	Category		
		Urban	Semi Urban	Rural
Pre1940s	7	7	-	-
1940s	11	11	-	-
1950s	15	11	4	-
1960s	72	51	14	7
1970s	77	38	15	24
1980s	73	21	12	40
1990s	74	27	10	37

*Database - 'Universities Handbook', 29th Edition, Association of Indian Universities, New Delhi, January, 2002.

the growth of colleges proliferated to rural areas. Till the 1950s, there were no colleges in the rural areas. In the 1980s and 1990s, the colleges established in the areas outnumbered their urban counterparts.

The reasons for the increase in demand for higher education is a very broad topic and cannot be discussed within the limitations of a seminar paper. However, it is worth mentioning in this context that neither the policy of the government, nor the present rules of both the government and universities in Assam act as obstacles or deterrent in the process of establishment of a college. The establishment of a college generally gets initiated when a community steps in to establish and support a college usually without seeking any prior approval from the government. The demand is at times also engineered by unemployed post-graduates and even retired college teachers, who help in establishing new colleges, where they find employment. It is done with the hope that one day the government will take up the responsibility of maintaining the college. The first batches of students sometimes appear in examination through other established and affiliated colleges. The political leaders of the area too support the college and later, on a *No Objection Certificate* from the government, which is necessary for seeking affiliation of the college from the university, is secured without much trouble. After getting the nod from the government, the college approaches the university for affiliation and

under the circumstances, it becomes difficult for any university and especially the State University to deny at least a temporary affiliation to the college.

Though we perceive the growth of a large number of colleges, yet the courses (degrees) offered in the colleges have not undergone any significant change and B.A., B.Sc., and B.Com continue to be the main degrees (courses) that are offered in the colleges since the pre-independence days. It is noteworthy that the number of B.A. courses in the colleges of Assam outnumbers the B.Sc. or B.Com. courses. The growth of professional colleges is also very limited. These peculiarities have made the very development of colleges in Assam in particular, and higher education in general lopsided. It has also adversely affected the role of colleges as agents of social change and development.

III

On Quality and the Colonial Legacy

Several colleges were established under the British Raj in Assam, and these continue to prosper in the post independence period.⁵ Most of these institutions established under the British Raj served as models to the other institutions that were established after independence Assam. For example, Cotton College became a model for the other colleges in Assam. Overall, the curriculum hardly changed to suit the needs of an independent country and the needs of the local community were hardly stressed upon. It was a system from without. Consequently, in India, the number of colleges and universities offering the humanities and social sciences courses are much higher than colleges offering courses in science and technology. A gulf appeared between what was taught in those institutions and what the country required for her all round development. In spite of the tremendous development of education since independence, we have not been able to eliminate under-development or fanaticism in our country.

During the British period, higher education remained an integral element of colonial under-development. Though there were different motives in introducing higher education, it can be generalized that the colonial rulers used devise to create a set of educated people who could assist the colonial masters to perpetuate their rule in India and insulate the local people against the tide of modern industrial and scientific culture. Lord Macaulay stated in his minute, which he wrote in his capacity as

Law member on 2nd February, 1835 replying to the arguments of the *Orientalists*, "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population..."⁶ This came to be known as the *Downward filtration Theory*, and this concept of education filtering down from the upper classes of society to the masses remained inherent in the Indian education system till date.

As a matter of fact, a number of Indians who served the British were thoroughly denationalized, who looked with contempt everything that was Indian. But the very same education system gradually developed an awakening in the country, which developed a spirit of self-respect and national consciousness. Today, it is recognized that education is not only an important element in improving high intellectual standards, but also to provide the right kind of leadership for social and economic improvement and strive to promote equality and social justice by reducing social and cultural differences through the diffusion of education.⁷

We have to consider why there is a heavy demand for higher education. Todaro points out that most people in the less developed countries do not demand education for its intrinsic benefits but simply because it is the only way to get highly paid employment.⁸ These derived benefits must be weighed against the costs of education. The demand for higher education is related to the modern sector traditional sector wage differential. If we can reduce such wage differentials we may be able to restrict the demand for higher education to a great extent. The wage differentials can be reduced provided the productivity of the traditional sector can be increased substantially through greater investment in infrastructure and other aspects of development.⁹

The educated people in modern jobs also acquire certain amount of social distinction particularly in developing countries like India. During the British period, the upper class Indian elite by supporting imperial rule enjoyed some crumbs of privilege and affluence. Even after independence and in spite of a democratic set up, there was little change in cultural learning and the same alien nations continued in administration for which the employees in the modern sector, with a 'babu culture' enjoyed

privileges of power and position which were denied to the people in the traditional sector.¹⁰

However, the absence of any change of direction in higher education resulted in promotion of the existing system (a colonial legacy) and colleges had no option, but to follow the same. The National Policy of education could not change the basic colonial character of the higher education system as was provided by the colleges. We have to acknowledge the fact that education is only a constituent sector of the society, and the existing socio-economic system will affect the system of education. At the same time it must also be stated with equal emphasis that the education system if effectively developed may help to bring about desirable changes in the society.

Consequently, in Assam, the desirable change in the levels of knowledge, skill or attitude in the entrants (students) to the colleges does not take place. New and meaningful courses of studies on management, entrepreneurship, agriculture, mechanics, commerce, accountancy, health and hygiene, child care and development, etc., with increasing emphasis on vocationalisation of under graduate education is yet to take place. It was very much unlike the education system of the USA, admittedly the dominating world power in terms of power derived through scientific knowledge and technology.

IV

A Comparison

Today's world is regarded by many as a uni-polar world and admittedly the west dominates in terms of power derived through scientific knowledge and technology. In the United States of America (USA), the colleges were developed basically on the provisions as laid down in the first Morrill Act, passed by the US Congress in 1862 and named after its sponsor, Justin Smith Morrill.¹¹

Under the provisions of the Act, each state was granted 30,000 acres of federal land for each member of the Congress representing the state. The lands were sold and the resulting funds were used to finance the establishment of one or more school to teach 'agriculture and mechanic arts'.¹² Though the Act specifically stated that other scientific and classical studies need not be excluded, its intent was clearly to meet a rapidly industrializing nation's need for trained technicians. Military training was

required to be included in the curriculum of all land grant schools, and this provision led to the establishment of the Reserve Officers Training Corps, an educational programme for future army, navy and air force officers.¹³

Some states established new schools with their land grant funds; other turned the money over to existing state or private schools to be used for the establishment of schools of agriculture and mechanics, which came to be known as "A&M" colleges.¹⁴

The influence of the land-grant colleges on American higher education has been formidable. In recent years almost one-fifth of all colleges seeking degrees in the United States were enrolled in land-grant institutions. Pioneering research in physics, medicine, agricultural science, and other fields has been done at land-grant colleges, and because their admission policies were more open than most other institutions of the day, land-grant schools made it possible for women, working-class students, and students from remote areas to obtain undergraduate and professional education at low cost.¹⁵ There were sea-grant colleges also which were established on similar lines.

There were also *community colleges* established in the USA in the early years of the twentieth century.¹⁶ They generally provide education for the first two years of a Bachelor's degree (leading to transfer to four – year colleges or universities) and one or two years of a technical training program (leading to employment).¹⁷

The education system helped to develop an entrepreneurial society in the USA, an element totally absent in the society in Assam.

V

Conclusion

In spite of the phenomenal growth of colleges in Assam, there is now a general feeling that the standard of higher education is declining. Stern warning has been voiced by the intellectuals about the future of the colleges in Assam. In the future, in a number of colleges, 'there will hardly be any student willing to study in them'.¹⁸

Colleges can provide the necessary education to uplift the traditional sector and enhance its productivity and the much sought after prestige in the eyes of the public. For example, colleges might act as agents of

begetting knowledge for the people engaged in the traditional sector through liaising with the groups/institutions, which can provide the knowledge and inculcate such values in the students, which will attract them towards the traditional sector as well. But even after the political independence of the country, the colonial character of higher education did not change as the education system was used to serve the cause of the neo-capital order. The traditional sector like agriculture did not get adequate importance in the education system. That is why the educated people in modern jobs continued to acquire certain amount of social distinction unlike their counterparts in the traditional sector, particularly in developing countries like India. During the British period, the upper class Indian elite by supporting imperial rule enjoyed some crumbs of privilege and affluence. Even after independence and in spite of a democratic set up, there was little change in cultural learning and the same alien nations continued in administration for which the employees in the modern sector, with a '*babu culture*' enjoyed privileges of power and position which were denied to the people in the traditional sector.

It is in this context that transformation of lot of the existing colleges in Assam into multipurpose *community colleges*, —seats of learning, which will provide the knowledge required for sustenance of the local community based on new curriculum and courses of studies which may provide the right knowledge, attitude and skill on agriculture, mechanics, commerce, health and hygiene, entrepreneurship, etc.

Perhaps it may then be possible to transform the existing trend of higher education, which according to Gandhiji, never taught the student to have any pride in his surroundings. Gandhiji pointed out the higher a student goes (in the field of education) the farther is he removed or alienated from his surroundings. What Gandhiji stated as very unfortunate is the fact that our educated youth suffer intellectually and emotionally an alienation from their motherland, village, community and the nation. In such an environment, education cannot prepare people's mind to receive new ideas and accept new tool, new relationships and new forms of organization.¹⁹ This will be possible if the institutions of higher education provides education keeping in view the needs of an independent country. To achieve that, colleges must break away from their *ivory tower* (colonial?) existence.

Notes and References

1. *India 1990*, published by the Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi, September, 1990, p.83.
2. *Ibid.*
3. S.L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, New Delhi, 1986, p.626.
4. J.B.College, Jorhat (1930), G.C. College, Silchar (1935), M.C. College, Barpeta (1939), B. Barooah College, Guwahati (1943), Nowgong College, Nagaon (1944), D.H.S.K. College, Dibrugarh (1945), Nalbari College (1945). For further details, see Table I and II.
5. See Table I. And II.
6. Siddheswar Saikia, *History of Education in India*, Gauhati, 1971, p.15. Orientalists referred to that group in the Committee of Public Instruction (under the British Raj in the 19th century) which advocated imparting of education in the vernacular medium.
7. Baidyanath Misra, "Prospects of Restructuring of Higher Education", in the *University News*, Vol.40., New Delhi, January 14-20, 2002, p. 1.
8. Micheal Todaro, *Economics for a Developing World*, Longman, 1977 as stated in *Ibid.*
9. Baidyanath Misra, *op. cit.*, p. 2
10. *Ibid.*, p.3.
11. Encyclopedia Britannica 2002, Delexe CD edition, file:<Program Files/Britannica/101/cache/info-000012.html.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *International Student Guide to The United States of America, 2002-2003*, Pittsburg, USA, 2002, pp.19-20.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Pabitra Kumar Sharma, "viswavidyalay anudan ayogor shehotiya niti" article in Assamese, in the *Amar Asom*, (Assamese Daily) Guwahati, 14th June, 2002, p.3.
19. Baidyanath Misra, *op.cit.*, p. 5-6.