

EDUCATION AND LEARNING IN EARLY ASSAM

SATYENDRANATH SARMA

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JORHAT-1

EDUCATION AND LEARNING IN EARLY ASSAM



SATYENDRANATH SARMA

**Retd. RABINDRANATH TAGORE PROFESSOR,
Gauhati University**

Price : Rs. 12.00 (Rupees fifteen only)

**TULASINARAYAN SARMA MEMORIAL
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Education & Learning in Early Assam is the printed version of the two memorial lectures delivered by Dr. Satyendranath Sarma in December, 1987 at J. B. College. It has now been published by Sri M. L. Phukan, secretary of the T. N. Sarma Memorial Trust, Jorhat.

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Tulshi Narayan Sharma was born in 1899 at Jorhat. Passed Matriculation Examination in 1918 from Jorhat Govt. H. S. School securing Ist Division. Passed B. A. from Cotton College with First class Honours in Sanskrit in 1923. Passed M. A. from Calcutta University in Sanskrit. He obtained the degree of M. A. in Modern Indian Language in 1948. Married Smti Usha Devi in 1926. Started J. B. College on 10th October, 1930, became Vice Principal of the College in 1945. In 1948 became Principal of J. B. College till his death. Continued to be the Secretary of the Governing Body till his death. Tulshi Narayan Sharma was a prolific writer; he was connected with many literary, cultural, youth and students' organisations. He was the Secretary of Assam Olympic Association in 1940. He translated into Assamese five chapters of 'Bhagawat Gita', and wrote two books 'Saj Acharan' and 'Biar Upahar'. He narrated in a lucid style the story of 'Shakuntala' from original Sanskrit in Assamese. He wrote articles on 'Sardah Act' passed by the Central Govt. in 1929 in connection with child marriage.

Tulshi Narayan Sharma was an invitee to the South East Asiatic Educational Conference held in Madras in 1948, where he presented a paper on University Education in India.

Principal Sharma breathed his last on 30th September, 1952.

PREFACE

This small work is the printed version of the Tulsinarayan Sharma memorial lectures delivered by the author in Jagannath Barua College of Jorhat in January 19 and 20, 1988. Tulsinarayan Sharma was not only one of the active founders of J. B. College, but also served for several years as its principal. He was the key person responsible for the establishment and development of J. B. College as on one of the premier college of higher education in eastern Assam. The college was established in 1930 when there was no other college in the Brahmaputra valley except Cotton College at Gauhati. With a view to perpetuating the memory of the late Sharma his sons and relatives, particularly his eldest son Dr. Jayanta Madhav Sharma created a trust fund to be operated by a Trust Committee with the Principal of J. B. college as its secretary. It was decided by the Trust Committee to hold a memorial lecture at the end of every two years with the money accumulated as interest. This is the second lecture series of the Memorial Trust. I have tried to show in this work the educational and scholarly achievements of the people of Assam from the ancient times to the coming of the British which serves as the watershed between early and modern Assam. As I had to cover practically 1500 years of educational and scholarly achievement within two lectures. I could not go into detail of some of the important works of the early period for which I must apologise to the learned readers.

I must express my sense of gratitude to the members of the Trust Committee for giving me the opportunity to deliver the lectures which have now been published in the book form. I am particularly grateful to Dr. D. N. Barthakur, retired regional Director of ICAR, for taking active interest in publishing this book. I must also thank Sri Maniklal Phukan, Principal, J. B. College, Jorhat, for organising the lectures and making necessary arrangement for publication.

I must also thank the workers of Purbadesh Mudran, Guwahati, for neatly printing the work.

Satyendranath Sarma

2/4/88

PREFACE

FOREWORD

T. N. Sarma Memorial Lecture Trust was instituted on 15th June, 1979, the year in which J. B. College attained its Golden Jubilee. It was one of the several trusts set up during the Golden Jubilee year.

J. B. College authority considered it necessary to arrange a series of lectures in memory of T. N. Sarma, the founder Secretary of J. B. College, and took up the matter with Dr. J. M. Sarma, the eldest son of the founder Secretary. Dr. J. M. Sarma, the then Country Manager, Asian Development Bank, Manila, Philippines, at once agreed to donate Rs. 35,000.00 to set up a trust in memory of his father. The interest accruing to the said trust money has to be utilised in organising lectures of general interest for the country, and particularly of this region, in educational, cultural and socio economic fields and in the publication of lectures so delivered. According to the rules laid down in the trust deed, the lecture has to be organised annually or biennially, but in no case the lecture can be put off beyond three years.

Dr. Rais Ahmed, the Vice-Chairman of the University Grants Commission, delivered the first lecture of the Trust on Education and Regional Development. The lecture could not be published in book form as it was not submitted to the Trust in writing.

Dr. Satyendranath Sarma's lecture on Education and Learning in early Assam is the second lecture of the T. N. Sarma Memorial Lecture Trust. It was delivered in December, 1987.

I take the privilege of writing this foreword to the lecture of Dr. Satyendranath Sarma, Retd. Rabindranath Tagore Professor, Gauhati University, and I sincerely believe that the book will help readers and the researchers of socio cultural life of the North Eastern Region by giving them a sense of direction in their investigation.

Dr. Sarma begins his investigation and research of Education and learning in early Assam with the promise that formal education in early Assam was introduced by the Indo Aryans who had migrated to Kamrupa from the Gangetic valley in the early centuries of the Christian era. He, however, does not rule out the possibility of the existence of some kind of informal learning among the Indo-Mongoloid tribes. He then goes on to give a critical summary of the ancient Indian Schools generally called the Gurukula. The system, the author points out, followed the policy prescribed by Manu and Yajnavalkya. Apart from the researchers, the average readers also find it very interesting to learn that technical sciences like engineering, craft making and medicine systematically taught in ancient India, were as much a part of the guru-sisya tradition as of the hereditary guilds. The author observes that the influence of the Vedic Asramite system of education started waning with the emergence of the centres of learning like Taksasila and Nalanda. Referring to *Harsa-Charita*, he points out, that Asramite education, continued till the seventh century in spite of emergence of the centres of learning.

Dr. Sarma's searching examination of the education system in ancient and medieval Assam is based on the broad statement that Assam had been in the cultural map of India and the Pan-Indian system of education was adopted in Assam with modifications to suit local conditions. Education was a special privilege of the upper strata of the society. The author interprets what Huen-tsang noted as popularisation of education as the celebrated traveller's opinion based, in all probability, on his observation centering the capital complex. Exploring inscriptions and authoritative works, the author points out that the system of education, generally known as 'gurukul', which was Pan Indo-Aryan in character and prevailed in ancient Assam, produced Assamese scholars who were honoured outside Assam for their scholarship.

The author gives a comprehensive summary of the wide range of subjects taught in ancient India as well as in Assam

and critically examines the need of different subjects specially taught to the different classes of pupils. He traces the origin of the Kamrupa School of Smṛti writers to the local need for the study of the smṛti sastras. Discounting probable exaggerations in the description of kings and donees, the author concludes on the basis of the citations from inscriptions from the seventh to the twelfth century, that the Vedas with ancilliary branches, grammar, different systems of philosophy, tantras and poetics were avidly studied in early Assam. The author makes ancient Assam appear a varied land teeming with a wide range of scholastic pursuits, the cult of tantra, worship of rivers and trees, and also the practice of monism.

Education connotes systematic training and instruction especially to the young in schools and colleges and the connotation usually leaves out whatever form of formal and informal training and instruction prevailed in ancient periods. Such education, builds up the infrastructure of the cultural life of the people in ancient time. Our civilisation does not abandon such education entirely but draws sustenance from it. Dr. Satyendranath Sarma's Education and learning in Early Assam greatly contributes to research and investigation of the education system that directed the stream of cultural life in early Assam. The present education system silhouettes against the magnificent backdrop of a very rich educational and cultural heritage.

Manik Lal Phookan

Principal, J. B. College,
Jorhat

CONTENTS

1. A few words by the writer		
2. Foreword : Manik Lal Phukan		
Introduction : Education in Ancient & Medieval India	...	1
Chapter II : Education in Ancient Assam	...	8
Chapter III : Education in Medieval Assam	...	26
Bibliography	...	56
Index	...	59

Chapter I

EDUCATION & LEARNING IN EARLY ASSAM

Introduction

Assam, that is Kāmarūpa in ancient literature, was the meeting ground of various ethnic groups, viz., the Caucasoids, the Austroloids or the Mon-khmers and the Mongoloids. Some scholars have also noticed the Negrito strains in a few tribes of Assam. In addition to the Nordic Aryans, the Alpine as well as the Mediterranean stock of the Caucasoids, viz., the Dravidian elements are also noticed by the anthropologists working on different racial units constituting the population of Assam. All the racial groups migrated, at different periods of history, proto-history and pre-history to Assam, the exact dates of which cannot be definitely established. The Aryans, in different groups, started migrating to Kāmarūpa in the early centuries of the Christian era. If the reference in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* about the crossing of the river Sadānīra by Videgha-Māthava with sacrificial fire is considered as a historical incident¹ and if the river Sadānīra's identification with Karatoyā, as done by Sāyanācārya, could be accepted, then the Vedic Aryans must have entered Kāmarūpa, then known as Prāgjyotiṣa, at least a few centuries before Christian era. Bhāṣkaravarmā of the seventh century who renewed the land-grants of his grandfather Bhūtivarmā by his Nidhanpur copper-plate inscription names no less than 205 Brāhmin families belonging to 40 gotras. It can be reasonably assumed that Bhūtivarmā, the grandfather of Bhāṣkaravarmā ruled Prāgjyotiṣa towards the middle of the sixth century A.D. If in a single inscription as many as 205 families were mentioned, the number of Brahmins and other Indo-Aryan

1. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, iv. I.

language-speaking people must have been sufficiently large. The great Chinese traveller Hiuen-Tsang, who visited the court of Bhāskaravarmā, testifies to the existence of numerous deva temples in Kāmarūpa. This proves that by the beginning of the seventh century Kāmarūpa was considerably Hinduised and Aryanised. According to the *Kālikā purāṇa*, Narakāsura who hailed from Mithilā, having been installed as the King of Prāgjyotiṣa, invited Brahmins from North India and settled them in his Kingdom by driving out the *Kiratas* (Mongoloid tribes) to the extreme north-eastern region (Dikkaravāsinī) and the sea-shore². Narakāsura was an Aryan prince but later he was degraded to the *brātya* status and condemned as an *asura* for his un-Aryan practices and conduct. If Narakāsura is considered an historical Aryan prince, the Aryan immigration to Kāmarūpa must have started at least from the second or third century B.C. In that case, the history of education in ancient Kāmarūpa could be pushed back to the beginning of the Christian era or one or two centuries earlier.

We do not have any record of the life and society of the Indo-Mongoloid tribes prior to the nineteenth century. There are references to these tribes in earlier literature, but no detail is available regarding their mode of living. We cannot conceive of the existence of any sort of formal education among them, but the vogue of professional or traditional learning of some rudimentary crafts cannot be ruled out. But the formal education of different branches of study was introduced by the Indo-Aryans who migrated to Kāmarūpa from the Gangetic Valley in the early centuries of the Christian era.

The ancient Indian schools or institutions were mainly located in hermitages, far away from the din and bustle of the populated towns, where serenity and solitude conducive to study and contemplation reigned supreme. The teachers or *gurus* admitted pupils by holding a solemn and sacred ceremony called *upanayana* or sacred initiation. The

2. *Kālikā-purāṇa*, 36. 4.

initiation ceremony conferred *dvijatva*, a spiritual birth, on the pupils³. Thus a spiritual bond used to develop between the teacher and his pupils. The highest knowledge was called *parā-vidyā* which illuminated the students with the knowledge of the Absolute Reality. The learning which imparted knowledge of *trivarga*, i.e., *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*, essential for leading a virtuous householders life, was called *aparā-vidyā*.

According to the *gurukūla* system of Education the pupils were required to stay with their teacher as members of his family so that education could be a whole-time process. Students, besides attending their classes, were also required to help his guru in running his house-hold affairs, such as, collecting fuel, tending cows and other works pleasing to the guru. Besides the residential schools in the hermitages there were academics for advance study (*parishads*) and the assemblies of learned men who frequently met at the courts of the learned kings. The court of King Janaka was such a place of higher discussion. Teachers during the *smṛti* period were of two types, viz., *ācārya* and *upādhyāya*. The former capable of teaching all the Vedas with its auxiliaries, was considered higher than the latter who could teach only a part of the Vedas with its auxiliaries.

The *Manu smṛti* in its second chapter gives an elaborate injunction as to how a pupil should behave and conduct himself in the house of his preceptor. He was required to serve the teacher at his bath and toilette, to massage his body and to do works that were pleasing and beneficial to him. He had to offer daily oblation to the fire and used to go out for begging daily. A student was prohibited to store anything for future. He had to observe prescribed rules in respect of his dress and avoid things of luxury and amusement. He must be respectful to his elders and was asked to remain himself guarded in the presence of women. The guru or the teacher could not as a rule charge any fee or remuneration for imparting knowledge. But at end of

3. *Janmanā yāyate śūdrah, saṁskārat dvija ucyate.*

the prescribed period of study, if a pupil wanted to remunerate his teacher he was allowed to do so according to the wish of the preceptor. This is in nutshell the education policy prescribed by Manu and Yājñavalkya.

The *Arthasāstra* of Kautilya has laid down the education policy and curriculum to be followed by Kṣatriya princes. A Kṣatriya prince, according to Kautilya, after his *upanayana* ceremony, should study four branches of study, i.e. *trayī* (Vedas with auxiliary branches), *ānvikṣikī* (the three schools of philosophy, viz., Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika & Mīmāṃsā), *vārtta* (economics) and *daṇḍaniti*. After the completion of the above courses, a prince has to learn the art of warfare and the knowledge of *itihāsa* (dynastic history). The *śāntiparva* of the *Mahābhārata* and the celebrated Buddhist work *Milindapañha* (questions of Menander to Nāgasena) as well as some *smṛti* works have also dealt with the educational curriculum of different classes of the Indo-Aryan society of ancient India. According to the *Milindapañha* the Brāhmaṇas studied the Vedas, astronomy, astrology, materialistic, philosophy and the science of omen. The Kṣatriyas learnt the arts of managing horses, elephants and chariots, of managing accounts and waging war against the enemies.⁴

With the rise of Buddhism, monasteries for the monks or *bhikṣus* became the training ground of the newly initiated *śramaṇas*. The *Vinayapīṭaka* elaborately lays down rules, instructions and courses of study for the novices. Teachers normally followed the practice of oral instruction followed by answering questions of inquisitive students.

The knowledge of medical science was also imparted to interested students in important centres of learning. The highest achievement in medicine and surgery was attained by Caraka and Suśruta who must have been preceded by a series of unknown pioneers in this particular branch of science. Jīvaka, one of the most celebrated physician of the Buddhist period is said to have learnt the science of medicine in the University of Takṣaśīla.

4. *Milinda-pañha*, 1.9 ; iv. 3.

Several universities having provisions for imparting teaching in different branches of arts and science, sprang up under the patronage of Kings belonging to different dynasties. The university of Takṣaśilā appears to be the oldest one. It was established probably during the reign of the Kushana Kings of the first and second centuries of the Christian era. Other notable universities up to the eve of the Mahmmedan conquest were those of Nālandā, Vikramaśilā, Udantapura, Somapuri, Jagaddala and Valabhi. It is known from the records of the Chinese travellers of the seventh century, viz., Hiuen-Tsang and Itsing that there were ten thousand students and fifteen hundred teachers in the university of Nālandā. The university of Vikramaśilā contained one hundred and fifteen teachers and three thousand students. According Hiuen-Tsang, students after mastering a short primer called 'Twelve chapters' were trained in the five sciences, viz., grammar, the science of arts and crafts, medicine, the science of reasoning and the science of the internal. It may be mentioned that Hieun-Tsang resided in Nālandā for some time and therefore got the opportunity of knowing the university from a close quarter.

Technical sciences like engineering, craft-making and music were also taught in some of the educational centres. The theoretical knowledge and their practical application were also imparted through guilds on hereditary lines and also in the guru-śiṣya tradition. A large number of Sanskrit works composed between the first century and the twelfth century of the Christian era are now available on *vāstu-vidyā* (architecture), sculpture (*pratimā-nirmāṇa*), painting and music including dance. Some of the encyclopaedic purāṇas like the *Agni-purāṇa*, *Garuḍa-purāṇa*, *Matsya-purāṇa* and *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* are seen to have devoted chapters to the discussion of the above subjects. Besides these discussions in purāṇas on technical arts and sciences, there are some independent works which prove the existence of regular training on the basis of texts. Works like *Viśwakarmā-prakāśa*, *Mayamatam*, *Mānasāra*, *Samarāṅgana-*

sūtradhāra, *Śilparatnam* and some other works exclusively deal with the technique of early Indian architecture. In *Agnipurāṇa* and *Viṣṇudharmottara* we find expertise discussion on painting. From Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Nandikeśwara's *Abhinayadarpaṇa* to Śubhankara's *Śrīhastamuktāvatī* we notice the gradual evolution of the art of histrionics and dancing with all its technical details. There are many other works on music & aesthetics.

It may be mentioned here that with the emergence of great cities like Pātaliputra, Ujjayini, Vidiṣā etc. under the Maurya, Sunga and Gupta imperial dynasties and with the growth of different centres of learning like Takṣaśilā and Nālandā, the Vedic Āśramite system of education gradually receded to the background. But it did not went out of vogue. The last chapter of the *Harṣa-Carita* of Bānabhaṭṭa, testifies to the existence of the āśramite education in the Vindhya forest in the seventh century A.D.⁵

With the establishment of the Muslim rule in India, the educational system in India had undergone certain changes. The Islamic educational system was introduced and provisions for teaching this new system of education were made by establishing makhtabs and madrassas. The Arabic, the language of the *Korān* and the Persian, the language of the poetry were taught in schools and madrassas. The Persian being the court language was also learnt by the well-to-do section of the people who maintained some connection with the court and administration. In Assam, however, the two Islamic languages did not or could not thrive either as media of education or languages of the court on account of the fact that this country never came under the Muslim rule. But as a part of western Assam was temporarily ruled by the Mughals, some administrative and revenue terms were left as a legacy of their rule. But majority of the Persian and Arabic terms used during the British rule were introduced by the British administrators in the early part of the nineteenth century when the

5. *Harṣa-Carita* (concluding chapter)

administrative policies for ruling Assam were taken in Calcutta.

The Āhom government however did not interfere in the religious affairs of the Muslims and even encouraged establishment of schools for the Muslims. We shall however deal with this topic in the third lecture.

Ancient Assam, being a part of the cultural map of India, generally followed the Pan-Indian system of education in both ancient and medieval times, making necessary modifications to suit the local needs. An attempt has been made to present a picture of educational condition and achievement in learning in ancient and medieval Assam in the following pages.