Despatch of 1854 and Mass Education in Assam During the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

Archana Chakravarty

On the renewal of the East India Company's Charter in 1853, the problem of education attracted the attention of the authorities in England, After a thorough discussion with the competent educationists like T. C. Marshman, C. E. Trevelyan, P. Halliday and others, the Court of Directors decided in favour of mass education which would give birth to a more enlightened generation in future and thereby enable the Government of India to have a better system of administration. On this consideration, under the direction of the Court, a comprehensive scheme of education was drawn up in the Despatch of 1854 by Charles Wood, the then President of the Board of Control. The despatch brought to an end the period of vacillation and confusing experiments of a sporadic nature. It recommended that the efforts of the Government should be directed towards diffusing useful and practical knowledge suitable for the masses who were utterly incapable of obtaining it by their own efforts.[1] It was suggested that the provincial Government should implement the scheme successfully which was introduced by James Thomson, the Lieutenant Governor, North-Western Frontier Province, where emphasis had already been given on the extension of primary education by establishing schools on indigenous model which, if followed elsewhere, would impart correct elementary knwowledge to the great mass of the people.[2]

Accordingly, the attention of the Government of Assam was directed towards encouraging the indigenous schools. In 1855, it was decided to take the first step mainly in spreading education amongst those Assamese People who were too poor to get rid of their illiteracy. Although the need for schools was great, the Government was then not in a position to provide adequate funds. As far as the circumstances permitted, endeavours had been made to establish indigenous and self-supporting schools on grant-in-aid basis. The Inspecting Officers, of course, persuaded the people to take their share and initiative in the diffusion of knowledge.

In 1855-56, a large number of private schools of an indigenous pattern were opened in various parts of Assam. In 1855, in the district of Luckimpore, the first school of this kind was established in Gohpore *Mauza* in the hope of eventually obtaining aid from the Government.[3] In the district of Sibsagar, twenty-three indigenous schools owed their origin to the zealous exertions of Priolal Barua, the Sub-Inspector of Schools, Upper Assam; of these, seven could fulfil the conditions for grant-in-aid.[4] Similar schools were established in the districts of Darrang and Kamrup. All these schools imparted instruction to a total number of 1,479 pupils.[5]

Subsidy System

An interesting experiment began in the following year when rewards were made to those teachers who could attract a greater number of boys for their schools to acquire a little knowledge of the Three R's. The schools under this experiment were known as subsidy schools. In the districts of Kamrup and Sibsagar the experiment succeeded remarkably well. The annual grant allowed for this purpose was rupees sixty for Sibsagar and rupees seventy-five for Kamrup.[6] During 1857-58, there were six hundred pupils in the newly established subsidy schools of Kamrup and seven hundred and fifty in Sibsagar ; but in other districts the system did not work so well. In Luckimpore, there were three subsidy schools with an aggregate of 125 scholars, in Nowgong two with 126, in Darrang only one with eighty-six and in Goalpara two with 165 pupils.[7] Referring to the progress and importance of these schools William Robinson, the Inspector of Schools, wrote to the Supreme Government[8] ;

"These schools are..... so well attended as they ought to be, yet in every instance, initiative have to be taken, the inert mass to be moved..... and persuaded not only to send their children for instruction, but to assist in the maintenance and support of schools. The result therefore, though small, is cheering. It shows that a beginning has been made in the career of social regeneration and that the huge machinery of national education has been set in motion."

The Supreme Government readily sanctioned a further sum of Rs. 275/- to be paid as rewards to all indigenous school-teachers. From 1863-64, it was decided that the continuance of rewards to teachers should depend on the conditions that the schools would run efficiently and be subject to the inspection and general control of the Education Department ; but no conditions were imposed

regarding the levy of tution fees.[9]

The subsidy system was not an unmixed blessing, Firstly, the grant of money was based on the efficiency of the schools ; but proper judgment of a school could not be made regularly by the Inspecting staff as they could not visit all the institutions during the rainy season and in all other seasons on account of the difficulties of transport and communication. Secondly, if the teachers were not paid their monthly rewards regularly, they were tempted to take up other jobs for earning livelihood.[10] Inspite of these difficulties, new schools of this kind were springing up in places where none of this kind had ever existed ; and it was a source of great satisfaction that a good number of these intitutions were making steady progress, and a general movement in favour of education became distinctly perceptible. It was to the credit of these schools that after several years of apparently unsuccessful toil, they were able to show signs of vitality, giving indication that the people were waking up to a sense of their ignorance. Demands for financial aids from the Government began to pour in from all quarters.

In the despatch of 1859, Lord Stanley, the first Secretary of State for India, admitted that the encouragement of self-supporting schools would promote the spirit of selfreliance in the people who would be inspired to take, in future, the initiative to impart education beyond the elementary course even with the assistance of the Government.[11] Further, he suggested that as the subsidy schoolls alone would not be able to impart education to all children of school-going age, it was necessary to start new model schools under direct instrumentality of the state and to establish schools in the different parts of the country where no school of any kind existed and where the desire for education had been awakened.[12] This was in direct contravention to the despatch of 1854 ; and as a result, each province had to follow a policy of its own. In Assam, William Robinson, the Inspector of Schools, in collaboration with the Commissioner of Assam, decided, in 1860, to abolish fifty out of seventy-one Government primary schools of purely elementary character. At the same time, he wanted to raise the standard of the remaining twenty-one schools after distributing them throughout the province in such a way that boys desirous of prosecuting higher studies might get easy entrance into them. The curriculum of these schools was almost the same as that of the Government village schools.[13] Since the existing Government schools could not meet the growing demand of the large number of pupils for education of a higher order, Robinson's scheme received

the approval of the Government. It was considered desirable to keep up a few Government village Schools of a superior grade instead of too many inferior ones.[14] In 1862-63, nineteen schools of Kamrup, and ten of Nowgong were abolished, and twenty-one schools of Darrang, Sibsagar and Luckimpore were deprived of Government grant-in-aid.[15] To compensate the abolition of these schools the system of granting rewards to a large number of indigenous schools was taken up.

The scheme raised great dissatisfaction amongst the people. They complained to their respective Deputy Commissioners about the difficulties of sending children to places so far off from their homes for receiving elementary education in Government Vernacular schools of the superior grade. Inspite of this, the number of Government Village schools was further reduced. In 1870-71, there were only sixteen Government elementary schools with 1,113 pupils on the roll as against fifty-one schools with 1,748 pupils in 1860-61.[16] To compensate this, grant-in-aid to the indigenous self-supporting schools was increased and as a result the number of such schools raised to 147 with 3,604 pupils on the roll.[17]

Increase in Number of Primary Schools

Despite this increase, the progress of primary education was not satisfactory and the knowledge that was imparted in those schools was so disappointing that it was difficult to find even one in two hundred capable of reading and writing.[18] The primary cause of slow progress was the continuance of Bengali as the medium of instruction ; to the majority of the people Bengali was a language different from their own and not intelligible ; and as such parents found little interest in sending their children to such schools.[19] So the adoption of regional language as the medium of instruction became imparative. On this issue there had raged a long-drawn controversy which continued with occasional breaks till 1872, when George Campbell, the Lieutenant Governmor of Bengal, made Assamese the medium of instruction in all the schools of the Valley of the Brahmaputra. Within a few years of the introduction of the new measure the number of primary schools or the *pathsalas* rose to 355 with 9,820 pupils[20] as against 204 with 4,395 pupils in 1871-72.[21] At the end of 1884, the primary schools numbered 481 with 11,338 pupils.[22] Even the number of schools under regular inspection rose to 1,351 with 38,182 pupils as observed in 1881.[23] A new set of schools, namely, Lower Vernacular School came into existence in 1882, which were intermediaries bet-

ween the existing *Pathsalas* and middle schools. Seventy-two schools of this type with an average of forty pupils in each were established in both the valleys under the jurisdiction of the Commissioner of Assam.[24]

This rapid growth in the number of schools and pupils resulted in social regeneration of the people of both the valleys. Within a few years, the pupils were able to read and write letters, to survey the land they cultivated, and to compute the rent they had to pay for it. A knowledge of this nature was very useful to the people in the interior in their daily transactions ; and it was this usefulness that made them appreciate the system of education newly introduced.

Now, it appears that there was a steady increase in the number of schools and pupils. But the number was insignificant compared with the total population of the province. In the beginning of the present century, the population of Assam was more than 61 lakhs, and number of educable population was about 13½ lakhs, of these only one lakh students were in the schools.[25] The above mentioned numbers show how colossal was the problem of illiteracy and ignorance of the masses who were out of the doors of learning. The main obstacles, which stood in the progress of education in Assam were not far to seek. The causes of slow progress were almost same during the whole century. The province being an agricultural one, the common people had a general apathy towards education. Their eneral 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. Not unoften they remarked : "we want the hands more than the heads of our children, in order to get food to feel our mouths."[26]

Secondly, the supineness and the indifference of the influential classes of Assam were, to a great extent, responsible for the slow progress of education ; they took little or no interest at all in the institutions which they seldom visited, although they were expected to look after the general administration of these schools, and when required to build or repair a school house. Major Butler, Principal Assistant of Nowgong, suspected that the upper classes had the ulterior motive of keeping the rising generation down with a view to exercising their influence over them.[27] Thirdly, the desire for instruction being based on no correct idea of its value was unstable and inconsistent. The motive, which brought the boys to the school was simply the prospect of getting Government employment. But when this ultimate object was not achieved, the interest

flagged. The general complaint was that the Government had diverted the attention and energy of the people from their agricultural life to the hoax of Government service ; and, as such, they accused the Government, "You have given us education under the promise of employment and unfitted us for an agricultural life."[78]

No wonder, therefore, these barriers in the system of education continued to exist till the passing of the compulsory education Act in the first decade of the present century.

Abbreviations Used

C.D. .. Despatch from the Court of Directors, London.
R.P.I.B. .. Report on the Public Instruction, Bengal.
B.E.P. .. Bengal Educational Proceedings.
R.P.I.A. .. Report on the Public Instruction, Assam.

References

1. C.D., 1854 ; 19 July, No. 49, Para 41.
2. C.D., 1854 ; 19 July, No. 49, Para. 64.
3. R.P.I.B., 1855-56 ; Appendix - A., P.
4. R.P.I.B., 1855-56 ; Appendix - A., p. 90.
5. R.P.I.B., 1856-57 ; Appendix - A., p. 151.
6. R.P.I.B., 1857-58 ; Appendix - A., p. 172.
7. Ibid.
8. R.P.I.B., 1857-58 ; Appendix - A., p. 163.
9. R.P.I.B., 1863-64 ; Appendix - A., pp. 277-78.
10. Ibid ; p. 270.
11. C.D., 1859 ; 7 April, No. 4, Para 55.
12. C.D., 1859 ; 7 April, No. 4, Para 55.
13. B.E.P., 1860 ; 2 October, No. 9, Atkinson to Thompson.
14. B.E.P., 1862 ; 2 October, No. 10, Robinson to Atkinson.
16. Hunter, W.W., *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vols. 1,11.
17. Ibid.
18. B.E.P., 1860 ; 2 October, No. 10, Robinson to Atkinson.
19. R.P.I.B., 1863-64 ; Appenidx - A., pp. 279-81.
20. Hunter, W.W., op. cit, p.75.
21. R.P.I.A., 1881-82 ; p. 95.
22. Allen, B. C. ; *Assam District Gazetteers*, Statistical tables.
23. R.P.I.A., 1881-82 ; p. 10. 24. Ibid ; p. 12.
25. R.P.I.A., 1901-1902, Appendix - A.
26. B.E.P., 1847 ; 30 June, No. 90, Robinson to Jenkins.
27. Mills, A.M. ; *Report on the Province of Assam*, p. 27.
28. Ibid ; also R.P.I.B.; 1 October, 1851 to 30 September, 1852.