

The American Baptist Mission—Towards the cause of Garo female education

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Education of girls in India was confronted with difficulties. Even among the Garos where the women have more freedom and personal rights, it was not easy to convince them of the advantages of female education. However, right from the beginning, the girls were urged to study in the village schools along with the boys, and the girls were found to be studying in most of these schools. There were also evidences to show that the girls exhibited some natural bent for learning, but the need of the girls' help at home and the lack of interest on the part of the parents regarding the education of their daughters made progress in this line very slow.¹ But with the passage of time, the girls marched pace to pace with the boys and even did better result it one time or the other.

It was David Scott, the first Civil Commissioner and Agent to the Governor-General, who first proposed for a school for the Garo girls. On July 10, 1827, he suggested to the Government to clear the summit of Rangira hills and establish a Mission Station there where development works including a school for the Garo girls could be introduced. However, this noble scheme of David Scott came to naught.²

It was Dr. Miles Bronson, an American Baptist Missionary stationed at Nowgong, who on his first visit to Garo Hills in April, 1867, opened a school at Rajasimla village. The school soon had a class of 17 youngmen, a class of 13 small boys and a class of girls.³ In 1868, there were 20 girls found to be studying along with the boys in this school. In 1872, Dr. Stoddard, the first American Baptist Missionary specially designated to the Garos mentioned about a Girls' school at Rajasimla where there were 34 girls studying.⁴

The next school for the Garo girls was opened by Mrs. Keith, wife of the second American Baptist Missionary designated to the Garos, at Goalpara.⁵ This Girls' Boarding school was opened on January 1, 1874 under the care of Mrs. Keith who, despite her severe illness, kept the school in operation with intervals throughout the year.

There were 12 Garo girls in the beginning but was reduced to 10. Instruction was given in Garo and Bengali languages, in reading, writing, arithmetic, Catechism of Christian doctrine and sewing.⁶

Beginning of a permanent Girls' School

In response to an appeal for a lady Missionary teacher, the Home Board sent Miss Miriam Russell to Tura in 1879. On her arrival at Tura, she first learnt the language and had a house built for her and a school room for the girls. But she soon became ill and was obliged to leave Tura for a rest and change. In 1881, with health restored, she was ready to start a school for the girls and sent out word through "A'chikni Ripeng" (Garo Christian Monthly Journal) to the people to bring their girls to Tura but there was no response. She then decided that if the girls did not come, she would go to them. On December 26, 1881, she started her first tour among the people through rugged hills and dense jungles and visited village after village. The people were cordial and friendly, but when the school was mentioned, they were silent. The girls were anxious to go but their parents and friends opposed them. However, she managed to return to Tura with 10 girls on February 10, 1882. She immediately started the school where instructions were given in Bengali reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic, and Garo reading, writing and spelling. Sewing and Scripture were also taught in the school. The number fell off next academic session. Therefore, she toured again to find girls for her school. She spent the winter at Nishangram village, a large Garo village located at the northern fringe of Garo Hills, where there was already a school and brought 21 girls to Tura in 1884 when she started the school again. Towards the end of 1885, the school work was interrupted by Miss Russell's transfer to Gauhati (She became Mrs. Burdette) and the Girls' school at Tura was left uncared for until January, 1886 when Miss Ella C. Bond and Miss Stella Mason arrived at Tura. They first struggled with the Garo language and in 1887 toured the district and brought 12 girls to revive the school at Tura.⁷ The Girls' school was opened at Tura in the spring of 1887, Miss Bond taking charge of both the boarders and the classroom recitations. In fact, both these two ladies did steady work in the school. Miss Mason gave considerable time to sewing and other Industrial experiments. There was an increase in the enrolment of girls in the schools from 54 in 1887 to a higher number in 1889.⁸ From 1890 to 1898, Miss Mason followed by Miss Alice Rood, was in charge of the Girls school. In 1893, the Tura Girls' school was supervised by Miss Bond in the absence of Miss Mason. She gave daily sewing

lessons throughout the year. In 1891 and 1892, enrolment of girls in the school was 38 and 31 respectively. Meanwhile, the interests for education among the Garo girls had increased so that the girls in the Boys' schools numbered 253, and the people of Nishangram village started a Girls' school by themselves in 1892.⁹

In 1894, Miss Stella Mason was in charge of the school at Tura until she went home for health reasons. All teachings were done by her assisted by Garo teachers. After she left, Miss Alice Rood was in charge of the school who maintained it in order.¹⁰

In 1898, the Girls' school and the Boys' school were united because of the shortage of teaching staff. This was continued for a number of years with increasing success. Not infrequently the girls were among the brightest of their class. Dobaki W. Momin, niece of Ramke, the first Garo Convert, availing herself of the school privileges became the first assistant teacher among the Garo girls. Left a widow later on, she taught a large class of both boys and girls at a time when the boys were never supposed to yield to the control of a woman.¹¹

In 1898, Miss Alice Rood had to return to America due to health reasons and her place was taken by Misses Issabelle Wilson and Henrietta Morgan of Gauhati station during October 1898 to 1899. They were then relieved by Miss Stella Mason who continued to be in charge of the school work until 1901 when her health compelled her to return to America and was not permitted to come back to Garo Hills. Miss Ella Bond then took charge of the school.¹²

In 1899, there were 25 girl pupils in the school at Tura.¹³ In January, 1903, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Mason came to take up the school work. So Miss Bond who had taught in the school for many years, now gave herself not only to the care of the school, but also to the Boarding girls' literary and general work.¹⁴ In 1903-04, the proportion of girls' at school was considerably higher than that returned from any district except Khasi and Jaintia Hills,¹⁵ and 3 per cent of the Garo girls were under instruction.¹⁶ There was a gradual improvement in the attitude of both the girls and their parents towards education and the relationship between the girls and the boys in the school has also improved.¹⁷

In 1906, Miss Linnie Holbrook arrived at Tura, and as there were not enough teachers in the school, she began to teach there. The following year, the school at Tura was raised to the Middle English school.¹⁸

In March, 1908, Miss Robb, the first Nurse to work among the Garos came to Tura from the Telegu Mission and taught in the school

as well. She also looked after the health of the Boarding girls and the school.¹⁹

In 1911, two Garo girls went to Calcutta and entered a Hospital where they were trained as nurse. In the same year, one girl went to Shillong to study in the Girls' Mission school there. These were the first Garo girls to have any higher training outside.²⁰ In the same year, Mrs. Moore reported that there were 987 girls reading in Christian schools in Assam. Of this number, 520 were Garos.²¹

In 1913, two girls went to Calcutta and studied in High school. Of these two, one finished High school and studied a year in College. The same year, three Garo girls were sent to Nowgong Mission Girls' Training school for Teachers' training. These were the next batch of Garo girls who went outside for further studies.²² There were 36 girls in the Boarding at Tura and Miss Robb was in charge of the school till she was obliged to return to America the following year due to health reasons. The school and the boarding were then looked after by Miss Bond alone. 18 girls were supported by the Mission and three were supported by the individual missionaries and five were self-supporting. There were about 45 day pupils and the girls in the Upper Primary numbered 53. The number of L. P. Schools for the girls was 74.²³ In 1916, there were altogether 24 girls in the Tura Girls' Boarding, out of whom 18 were helped by the Mission, 3 self-supported and 3 supported by relatives.²⁴ In this year, Miss Holbrook opened the Kindergarden school for the first time at Tura. On the opening day, there were only 7 children but before the year is ended, there were 29.²⁵ There were 50 girls in the Upper Primary schools with a total population of 633 girl pupils in the district.²⁶

In 1919, Miss Charlotte A. Wright arrived at Tura and helped in the Girls' school. In the following year, the school had been separated, the Boys' section having been taken over by the Government and the Girls' section opened as a separate school under the Mission, with an enrolment of 92.²⁷ The Girls' school was then raised and called it the Mission Middle English Girls' school. There were 66 girls in the M. E. section. From 1906 to 1920, 213 Garo girls had studied there.²⁸

In 1926, there were 152 girls in the Girls' school at Tura, out of whom, 23 girls were taking the Government Primary Examination and 16 girls in class VI. The two brightest girls were sent to Shillong and one girl entered Nowgong Teachers' Training school. Miss Sen, the Government Assistant Inspectress visited the school for the first time in 1926. There were altogether 1,663 Garo girls

studying in district school, not counting those in the private schools.²⁹ In the same year, Miss Hazel Wetherbee came to help in the Girls' school and published a series of Readers known as the Wetherbee Readers.³⁰ 60 girls were supported by the Mission this year, 6 were Government scholarship holders and two were self-supporting.³¹

Miss Hazel Wetherbee also opened the Junior Teachers' Training Class in 1929 at Tura. In October, 1930, Miss Fern Rold arrived at Tura to carry on the school work left by Misses Wetherbee, Blakely and Wright and worked as the Principal of the school till 1962. She was responsible for all-round improvement of the school at Tura and in the district schools as well. The present Mission Girls' school building was built and completed in 1933 so that the classes could be held under one roof.³² Soon attendance increased until the buildings were too crowded. Instead of urging the girls to come to school, they had to be turned away. Everyone considered it a privilege to come to this school. The total enrolment in 1936 was 174, and 84 in the Boarding.³³ In 1937 there were 44 L. P. Schools to whom Mission gave about one-third of the cost, the Government one-third and the rest was borne by the villagers. There were 15 L.P. Schools under Mission care and the total enrolment in all the Mission schools was 13,000, out of which about 50% were girls.³⁴

When the Second World war broke out, there was a decrease in the enrolment in all the schools in the Garo Hills. This was due to their fear that the war might extend to their areas. After the war, numbers increased again. On the other hand, it was found that as the number of pupils was less, there was improvement in the quality of school work.³⁵

The year 1961 saw two major changes. The Mission Girls' M. E. School was raised to High English School and the L. P. School section had been transferred to the District Council.

Thus a survey of the Education of Garo girls tells us that the spread of education not only among the girls but in the Garo Hills as a whole, was the handiwork of the American Baptist Missionaries. The Missionaries not only opened and managed the schools but also wrote and published school Text books and other reading materials though most of the publications were of religious character. They also took great care of the health of the school girls and the people at large. Thus their contribution was great and admirable. However, certain reservation has to be made while appreciating the work of the Missionaries in the field of education. The Mission came to this part of the world and elsewhere mainly for the spread of

Gospel and not to educate the people. Their main concern was evangelization and not education. Therefore, education was introduced as a means towards the main aim.

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