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# HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN GARO HILLS



**Milton S. Sangma**

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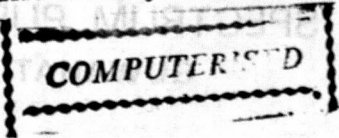
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## Preface

The annexation of Assam by the British Government in 1826 opened the north-eastern parts of India to the European influence on a far greater scale than ever before. The British rule that followed the annexation gave the population a taste of the evils as well as the benefits of European technology, administrative methods and ideas. The people of north-eastern India had a taste of the benefits of the European ideas through the medium of schools that were introduced in their areas by different Christian Missions under the patronage of the British Government.

The first school that was set up in north-east India was established at a village called Singimari during 1826-1829, a small British outpost located at the western extremity of the Garo hills through the efforts of David Scott. The next schools which were established especially for the Garos were set up at Gauhati in 1829 and at Goalpara in 1847. However, these schools were set up not with the intention of imparting real education to them but as a means of reforming their fierce and untamable habits so as to facilitate their entry in to their hills.

When the American Baptist Mission landed in the Garo areas, the whole educational scheme was handed over to them with some financial aids. They were given the full liberty to run the schools as they pleased despite the fact that the sole aim and object of the Mission was to evangelize and not to impart education. As a result of this irresponsible arrangement the quality of education imparted to the Garos was extremely low.

This book traces the history of the beginning and growth of these educational Institutions in the Garo Hills till nineteen seventies with some critical observations. As such, this is the first of its kind.

In a work like this where the participation of the British Government was the least, writing had to be guided entirely by the evidence left by the American Baptist Mission. However, care has been taken to incorporate the scanty materials left by the British Authorities wherever available so as to bring about a balanced judgement of the development.

I owe a great deal of thanks and gratitude to a number of persons and friends to whom I wish to acknowledge. I would like to express my thanks and gratitude to the Office Staff of the CBCNEI Office, Gauhati for having gladly allowed me to consult their records. I wish also to thank Rev. Karbenson D. Sangma, General Secretary, Garo Baptist Convention, Tura for having given all the facilities to check all the records and documents preserved in his Office. I would also like to record my thanks and appreciation to all my Garo friends who have encouraged me in various ways without which, this book would not have seen the light of day. At this moment, I wish also to thank Shri O. P. Rana of United Publishers, Gauhati, for having readily undertaken to publish this small manuscript of mine. Lastly but not the least, I wish to thank my wife and children for having endured and shared with me all the difficulties and inconvenience that came in course of my collection of material and preparation for publication.

Shillong, Milton S. Sangma.  
October, 1984

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Nokpante—the Traditional Institution of Learning

The Nokpante or the bachelors' dormitory was the only traditional institution which could be regarded as the centre of learning among the Garos. The word "Nokpante" literally means "a house of bachelors" (*nok* means house, and *pante* means bachelor). Almost every village had its own Nokpante or Nokpantes. In the big villages, each clan had its own Nokpante for the unmarried young men, but in some small villages, there was no Nokpante and the unmarried men slept either with their parents in the same house or in the house of the old widower. The Nokpantes were constructed at the centre of the village and in most cases opposite to the Nokma's or Chief's house.

The construction of the Nokpante was slightly different from that of the ordinary family dwelling houses in that the Nokpantes were more strongly built and were usually larger than the dwelling family houses. Some Nokpantes were about 6 metres high, about 10 to 12 metres wide and 25 to 30 metres long. There were no side walls from the front upto about half the length. Only the rear half of the building had side walls connecting the backside walls. Only two doors were kept, one in the front and the other in the backside of the building. There were no windows. The bamboo floor was about 3 to 6 metres high from the ground and a ladder helped one to ascend the Nokpante. Along the ladder, a big and long cane stalk was hung

from the roof of the house and it was used as support while ascending. The ladder was a big log of wood with steps cut on it. The roof was made up of thatch or bamboo leaves, and the walls were of split bamboo.

Huge timber posts were used in the construction of the Nokpante. These posts as well as the cross beams were decorated with colour or carved designs. Human figures both male and female and figures of animals like tiger, hog, reptiles and birds were carved out on the posts and beams. According to K.R. Marak<sup>1</sup>, some of these decorated posts and beams were preserved from generation to generation.

In some of the Nokpantes, pig heads and elephant tusks were also seen hung from the beams. Feathers of fowls, horns of cattle, drums and brass gongs which belonged to the whole community were also kept in the Nokpante. Inside the house and on the bamboo floor, a rectangular hearth was constructed where fires were lit during the winter to keep warm and to roast pork, beef and other meats for feasts.

All unmarried men from the age of about seven or eight slept in the Nokpante. They usually went there after their supper and slept in the night. The Nokpante is divided into two parts—one in the rear with the enclosed walls which formed the sleeping room where the young men talked, heroic deeds of their ancestors were told by the elders in songs and other songs were sung before they went to bed and the other part was the verandah. The verandah was used as a sort of school room for learning various arts and crafts of wood, cane, bamboo, etc. The old and experienced men of the village came to the Nokpante and taught the young boys how to carve, make baskets, implements and other useful arts.

Besides, the Nokpante was also used as court room where the Nokma or the village Chief held his court. According to K.R. Marak<sup>2</sup>, one of the most important decisions which was said to have been taken at a meeting in front of the

1. K.R. Marak, *The Garos and their Customary Laws and Usages*, p. 17.

2. *Ibid*, pp. 18-19.

## Nokpante – the Traditional Institution of Learning

Nokpante of Bonepa, a very influential Chief, was to change over from patriarchy to matriarchy as the former was not found suitable to their new environments. The custom of bringing his own nephew to marry the heiress was also said to have been decided in this meeting. The Nokpante of Bonepa was said to have been built on a rocky table land of about 600 cubic ft. in breadth, on the top of the Misi Kokdok hill in the Mouza No. IV in the middle of the East Garo Hills District.

The Nokpante also served as the Community Hall. The married men of the village used to go to Nokpante at leisure and in the evenings to spend their time or to teach the young boys to sing or to make baskets, mats, fishing nets and other useful arts.

The art of beating drums, playing of flutes, harps and such other vocal and musical instruments and dancing were also taught in the Nokpante by the senior boys and elders of the village to the younger boys.

Gymnastics, wrestling, high jump, long jump, tug of war and other ways of trial of strength were also practised in front of the Nokpante. Besides the practical training on different arts and culture, the Nokpante boys were also given practical lessons on discipline and on sense of duty. The younger boys were required to obey the orders of the senior boys. They were to observe all the rules and regulations of the Nokpante. For example, they were not allowed to roam about in the family houses at night. They were required to report at the Nokpante after their supper, failing which, enquiries were made and appropriate punishments were meted out to them.

The younger boys were also required to collect the required quantity of firewood and water for the day and they were not to refuse such assignments except for some unavoidable circumstances and illness.

The Nokpante boys also served as the guards of the village. In times of imminent danger from the neighbouring villages, the Nokpante inmates were required to watch the whole night in turn. In times of war against the neighbouring villages, the inmates of the Nokpante formed the main fighting force under the leadership of the seniormost man of the clan or

village. Whenever fire broke out in the village, the boys of the Nokpante were required to rush to the spot and put it off. Similarly, whenever the village was invaded by wild animals, like elephants or tigers, the Nokpante boys were expected to fight against them with spears, swords, daos etc. During the socio-religious festivals, the Nokpante boys started the celebrations by first offering sacrifices in the Nokpante and then dances were also started from the Nokpante after which they went straight to the house of the Nokma or the Chief. Thus the boys were kept under strict control and discipline.

From the foregoing it is seen that the Nokpante besides being a sleeping house of unmarried men, also served as an institution for imparting training on varied useful arts, culture and discipline.

The Nokpante being the sleeping house of unmarried young men, women were not allowed to enter except on certain festive occasions. There was however no separate house for the girls of the village to sleep together at night. The women slept in the house of their parents where a room was set aside for them. They were under the immediate and complete care of their parents. Thus the girls were trained in all works in their respective homes.

The Nokpante besides being the centre of training of young men, also served as an inn to visitors and strangers. The villagers were not allowed to sleep in the family houses. They were always taken to the Nokpante where they were to spend the night. The women visitors however slept with the other girls in family houses.

However, with the advent of the British, the introduction of Christianity and western education, the traditional Nokpante system has become obsolete. The traditional Nokpante system where all the boys of the village slept together in one room on the bamboo floor has become inconvenient for the boys to study. Thus with the opening of schools in the villages, the boys began to throng round their teacher in his quarters instead of sleeping in the Nokpante. In the villages where the Middle English and High schools were opened, the traditional Nokpante has been replaced by the Hostels. But the Nokpante

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system continues to exist even today in the Garo villages where unmarried boys of one or two families sleep together but it is entirely a private arrangement and the rules and regulations of the traditional Nokpante are not known to them. Thus with the passage of time and with the rapid progress of civilisation, the traditional Nokpante system has been losing its importance and its very existence.