

Education in Jaintia Hills, 1858-1897

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The Year 1854 ushered in a new era in the history of Jaintia Hills, that is, an era of literacy. Here, the term literacy means the ability to know the basic three R's, that is, reading, writing and arithmetic. Prior to this period, the people of Jaintia hills can be said to be in a pre-literacy stage except for these few Jaintias who settled in the Plains of the Jaintia Kingdom and who had studied in Bengal in Bengali dialect. After the British had annexed the Jaintia Kingdom in 1835, the missionaries came to these hills to evangelize and, as they commonly said, to civilize the heathens.

Thomas Jones, a missionary of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission, accompanied by his wife arrived in Cherrapunjee during the summer months of 1841. Immediately on his arrival, he learnt the local language and within a short span of time mastered it. He realised that using the Bengali script proved to be inefficient, for, most of the people could not understand the language. As such, he decided to adopt the Roman script for writing in Khasi. He introduced the first Khasi alphabet which numbered twenty-three altogether and he also published the first reader - 'Ka Kitab Thyngkong', which emphasised on the teaching of the alphabets. He translated Rhodomann's 'Mother's Gift' into Khasi. Later on other books were published such as the 'Anglo-Khasi First Book', the 'Hymn Book' and the translated version of the 'Pilgrims' Progress'. Thomas Jones had opened three schools in Khasi Hills - in Aongsawlia, Mawsmal and Mawmluh. The mission desired to spread its work to the Jaintia hills, and as such, in 1842, Thomas Jones accompanied by Capt. Lewin and Capt. Yule, visited these hills looking for a suitable place to start a school. They happened to reach one village (name unknown) on a market day. There in the market they conversed with the people telling them about the wonderful Grace of Jesus Christ and the Salvation which is within the reach of mankind. Coupled with the fact that they could find no suitable place to open a school, there was also the lack of missionaries, for Thomas Jones had to concentrate in the Khasi Hills. It was, therefore, unfortunate for the Jaintias that education could not be started in the 1840's. 1

It was only after a decade that the tide changed for the better. In 1854, by the Wood's Despatch, the Government had given emphasis to the development of education from the elementary stage to the University level. The Government headed by the then Governor General-in-Council, Lord Dalhousie, offered finan-

cial assistance of Rs. 50/- per month to the Welsh Mission for the development of Education without any bond.² Thus aided, the Mission in 1854, opened three schools, one in Jowai, the second in Sohbar and the third within the Soldiers' cantonment in Sohra. The opening of the Jowai school witnessed the start of education in the Jaintia hills. In the autumn of that, U lah sehra, was sent to Jowai as teacher of the school.³ U lah in his report about the place had described it as one in which the social evils of drinking, gambling and many others reigned rampant. The people lived in fear and the village was in constant alarm every night.⁴ The people were superstitious by nature and their belief in a she-devil, called 'Jaro' greatly disturbed them. Despite all odds, U lah was determined to continue and his devotion and sincerity paid great dividends in the long run. Obviously, attendance was to be poor for the parents felt that attending school was a waste of time and their children could augment the family income. Also, the parents feared that their children might embrace the new religion or the foreign religion as they usually referred to Christianity. In May 1856, U lah was replaced by U Larsing Khongwir, as the former had to return to Sohria. But Larsing too, left in 1860 when he accompanied Rev. Lewis on a visit to England. Shortly after, in 1863, Larsing expired at a young age of 27 and was buried at Chester.

In 1859, the second school in Jaintia hills was opened in Lamin.⁵ But before any positive results could be achieved, the Jaintia Rebellion broke out. It lasted for three years and was finally suppressed in March 1863. It is interesting to note that the converts in Jowai did not join the rebellion. Impressed by the good conduct of the Jaintia Christians and the peaceful role played by the missionaries, the Government increased its educational grant to Rs. 500/- per mensem which had been previously increased to Rs. 150/- per mensem in 1861.⁶ In this instance, when the grant increased to Rs. 500/-, the mission had to abide by the two conditions of the Government, that is, the missionary institutions should be subjected to supervision and inspection by the Inspecting officer of the Education Department and that the mission should submit an annual report with regard to progress of education. However, the Government would not interfere with the appointment of teachers nor with any of the internal affairs of the mission schools. Moreover the mission was given the right to appoint a sub Inspector whose salary would be borne by the Government. The first sub-Inspector to be appointed was U Jarkha.⁷ But U Jarkha remained in office for only a very short period for he died in 1867 after he suffered an attack of Cholera in Dacca where he had gone to submit his report to the Inspector there. The Government's co-operation helped the mission to extend its activities to other parts of Jaintia hills. In 1864 schools were opened in Nongbah, Shangpung and Nongtalang.⁸ In 1866, a Christian station was started in Shangpung. Interestingly, a few years after the rebellion a school was established at Nartiang by the Doloi of that

place. Impressed by the efficiency of U Riang Khrco, the teacher of this school, the Doloi gave the Mission a plot of land which was believed to be infested by evil spirits. The Christians worked and toiled the land and reaped a good harvest every year. Surprisingly, for some unknown reasons, the Doloi demanded the return of the field. The matter was taken to court which decided the case in favour of the Christians. In spite of this difference, the school at Nartiang continued to function.⁹

The thirteen schools established in the Jaintia hills upto 1870 were only elementary or primary schools.¹⁰ The reason was that the main objective of the missionaries was only to teach the people to read and write, so that they could read the Bible and sing the hymns in Churches. Later on, it was realised that only basic elementary knowledge was insufficient. As such, the Government in 1871-72 passed a resolution to upgrade the schools at Shillong, Jowai, Shella and Cherrapunjee to Middle English School.¹¹ Although the resolution had been passed in 1871-72, yet it was only in 1895 that the Jowai school was raised to a Middle English level.¹² Unfortunately, in 1897, the school building at Jowai collapsed, due to the severe earthquake that rocked the hills in that year. This was temporarily repaired so that classes could continue. During the first decade of the twentieth century, two school buildings were constructed one for the boys and the other for the girls. Simultaneously, two other buildings also were constructed for hostel accommodation. One was meant for the boys and the other for the girls. By the second decade of the century, classes were held in these new buildings.¹³

Although, the Jaintia language differ from the Khasi language, yet the medium of instruction in the schools of Jaintia hills was in the Cheria dialect. This was due to the fact that, since the schools in the Jaintia hills were started by the Welsh Mission, the missionaries felt that it would be easier for them to teach the Jaintias in the dialect which they had already mastered rather than learning and starting a new one. Also, the missionaries found that the two languages were more or less similar, that slight differences between the two could easily be bridged. During this period, the missionaries had done a public wrong by teaching the pupils in the local dialect for it restricted their entrance into the Middle English Schools where the medium of instruction was English. As a result, the mission was faced with the problem of wastage caused by premature withdrawal of pupils before they could obtain a complete education. The missionaries had to overcome difficulties such as ignorance, poverty and conservatism of the people. Due to poverty, the parents had to withdraw their children from the schools and engaged them in some occupations so as to augment the family income. Again, the parents' ignorant and conservative attitude made them prevent their children from acquiring any higher knowledge fearing that education would make them forget their own religion and culture.

The immediate impact of education in the Jaintia hills can be seen in the number of Jaintias being converted. At the initial

stage, it was seen, that, those who attended the schools, later on, embraced Christianity. The reason was that, the Mission school imparted education on the basis of christian ideology, for, their ultimate goal was evangelization. It was also seen that the converts had altogether given up the traditional religion and even certain customs of the society. For example, according to the age old custom, the husband would visit his wife only during the night. The whole day he would be in his mother's house. All that he earned would go to his mother, his sisters and their children. But a Jaintia convert would leave his mother's house. He would start a new life with his wife and his earnings would go to his wife and children. This was the start of the mono-family system in the Jaintia hills. The impact of this was that the position and power of the maternal uncle in his mother's house had considerably decreased. Thus, in conclusion it can be said, that, although education in Jaintia hills made its start twenty years after the British had annexed the Jaintia Kingdom, yet by the end of the century, a number of schools were established in the hills and the impact of education during the period witnessed the growth and development of christianity. But this was only the beginning. The progress of education on a larger scale took place in the twentieth century which greatly affected the socio-economic and political life of the people.

Notes & References

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3. *Ka Centenary History ka Balang Presbyterain ha ri Khasi-Jaintia* (1841-1940), Shillong, 1975, p. 7.
4. Rev. G. A. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 41
5. J. H. Morris, *The History of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists Foreign Missions*, Liverpool, 1910, p. 141.
6. Assam Secretariat Records.
7. Rev. G. A. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 4 .
8. Assam Secretariat Records.
9. J. H. Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
10. P. N. Dutta, *Impact of the West on Khasi and Jaintias*, New-Delhi, 1982, p. 194.
11. A. Chakravorty, *History of Education in Assam* (1826-1919), New Delhi, 1989, p. 134.
12. A. Shylla, *ki kam Skul ha ka Balang ha Kini ki 25 snem ba la lah*, Jowai, 1983.
13. Information given by Mr. H. Shylla, the Secretary of the Jowai Presbyterian Church.