

**PROCEEDINGS OF
NORTH EAST INDIA
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

TENTH SESSION

SHILLONG : 1989

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The Tenth Session of the North East India History Association was held at the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, amidst great enthusiasm and gaiety. This was indeed a memorable occasion in the history of the Association. The Decennial Celebrations aspart, a session was being held for the second time in the same institution and in the same venue that the Association was born ten years ago and the First Session held a year later. The Association is thankful to the authorities of the North-Eastern Hill University and organising it in the befitting manner.

Shri P. G. Marbaniang, Speaker, Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, inaugurated the session which was graced by Shri P. A. Sangma, Chief Minister of Meghalaya, as guest of honour. Professor Iqbal Narain, Vice-Chancellor, and Professor J. P. Singh, Head, Department of History, North-Eastern Hill University—did the Association a great honour as the Chairman of the organising committee and Local Secretary respectively for the session. It was presided over by Professor J. N. Phukan of the Gauhati University. The release of a commemorative Publication of the Organising committee entitled NEIHA DECENNIAL by Professor H. K. Barpujari, the first President of the Association, a decennial symposium on "A Decade of Historical Research in North-East", and colourful cultural programmes of songs and dances of the seven states of the region by the students of NEHU are among the special features of the decennial Celebrations. A record number of one hundred and eighty delegates attended the session in which ninety research papers were presented and discussed in eleven panels.

The present volume is the proceedings of the tenth session of the North East India History Association held at the North-Eastern Hill University on October 12-14, 1989. I am thankful to my colleagues Dr. J. P. Singh, Dr. M. S. Sangma, Dr. Gautam Sengupta, Dr. Soumen Sen, Shri Atul Dev Sarmah and Shri Amitabha Deb for the help in selecting and editing the papers and publishing the volume. We must also thank the Indian Council of Historical Research for generous financial assistance to the Association for the session and for publication of the proceedings.

J. B. Bhattacharjee

General Secretary,

North-East India History Association.

Shillong,

The 25th August 1990.

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The Attitude of the Assamese Towards the Boys' Scout Movement in the 1930s.

Meeta Deka

By the 1930s, the students of Assam had organised themselves under the banner of the *Assam Chhatra Sanmilian* and actively supported the Indian National Movement. In fact, the tempo of the nationalist spirit reached its height at this time and a large section of the students were attracted towards the wave of revolutionary terrorism and the Left platform. The affiliation of the *Assam Chhatra Sanmilian* to the All India Students' Federation in 1939, radicalised the student masses. Against the backdrop of such national consciousness, the Boys' Scout Movement was accepted only with suspicion, the people of Assam, particularly of the Brahmaputra Valley, envisaging the Movement as yet another attempt of the British to entrench imperialism.

The Boys' Scout and the Girls' Guide Movement, founded by Rebert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell, B-P for short, started in India in 1909, although the need for such a movement was felt as early as 1907. Its progress in India was sanguine as by 1920, several Boys' Scout and Girls Guide Associations grew in the country. Scout organisations were established at Calcutta, Jabbalpur, Madras etc., but these organisations were opened only for European and Anglo-Indian boys only. In 1916, Dr. Annie Besant and a few others emphasised the necessity of the participation of Indian boys in Madras and as a result, the Indian Boys' Scout Association was established. This encouraged the establishment of similar organisations in different places. In the next year, 1917, Pandit Madan Mohan Mallavya, Pandit Hridayanath Kunjru and Sreeram Vajpayee established the Boys' Scout Association in North India. 2.

It was at this time, that Baden-Powell was invited by Lord Reading, the then Governor-General of India, to visit the Indian Boys' Scouts and to form an united Boys' Scout Association. 3. In 1921, Baden-Powell came to India and united all associations into one single unit. Thus in 1922, the Indian Boys' Scout Asso-

ciation and the (B-P) Boys' Scout Association merged into the All India Boys' Scout Association. ⁴

Boys' Scout in the north-east was established in St. Edmunds' College, Shillong, in 1916-1917 for anglo-Indian and European boys only. However, in 1918, it was opened for others and this organisation of the north-east came under the Boys' Scout Association of India. The people of Assam were besitant and refrained from joining it, and in fact, even agitated against the Scout Movement in 1937, which to them had imperialist tendencies. ⁵ The *Asamiya* () stated that the Scout movement had created a schism among the students, and it had increased all the more due to the rule of saluting the Union Jack. ⁶ It further stated that though "service to others" is the characteristic of the scouts, yet the movement was meant for keeping India in subjugation by inspiring a slave mentality, and love for British rule in India. The people of Assam believed that the government would not hesitate to set the scout student against their fellow-friends through this movement. They believed that the Scout movement could be useful to the province only when a thorough change could be brought about in it, suited to local conditions. However since the people of Assam saw no hope for any such change at that time, they requested the students to keep away from it. ⁷

This reluctant attitude is not surprising when one considers the situation and the time when the Boys Scout Movement was introduced in Assam. The anti-colonial feeling and the spirit of the Indian National Movement had filled the atmosphere and therefore any action of the British would be regarded with suspicion. In fact, Baden-Powell himself was conscious of the fact that his movement would create suspicions, and this is revealed in one of his letters to Rabindranath Tagore, who at that time was at New York, where he expresses his apprehension :

I am only handicapped in my advocacy of it among my fellow-men in India by the fact that personally I carry rank through having been a soldier. This naturally makes, those who donot know me, suspicious of my intentions. ⁸

The people too, were probably not clear about the ideals and progress of the movement. The intentions of Baden-Powell were different. "Scouting as study was intended to enable the youth to tackle emergencies with a sense of readiness. While the youth is engrossed in normal work in mature age, nature still demands that the youth shall be interested in the fun²amental and the abnormal, and if this interesst be well used, he need not in later life feel

helpless when an accident occurs. And apart from emergencies, a man who is acquainted with subtleties of scholarship while he is ignorant of simple facts of life, is lacking in common sense and practical judgement, qualities of mind which are as important as any which scholarship gives. Such knowledge constitutes the main subject matter of what Baden-Powell has included under the term "Scouting" and it is connected with what is called, "the simple life".⁹

The Scout Spirit required a spirit of cooperation and comradeship, the team-spirit and it is expected to develop naturally in the right atmosphere by community of interest and sympathy. In this the Scout-Spirit has a wider basis and a more inclusive scope. It cannot come by obligation; "spirit comes from spirit".

The Scout Promise or the signing of the pledge and the making of the New Year resolutions are stimulants which in the first moments of enthusiasm a scout would make great efforts to keep and for the same reason are found to be useless to produce permanent results. "The Scout Promise was considered as a link that is registered to unite scouts together, but the scouting itself supplies the link without an artificial tie which at the best is only a formality, and the worst is an undesirable influence. It is on the spiritual link, and not on the bond that we are depending to unite the British Empire", Blyth wrote. And the organisation of the movement is a material link to promote intercourse, and to make the rules for facilitating intercourse. Rules have no authority with the spirit and are, as a matter of fact, arrangements for general convenience.

The Scout Law mainly emphasizes on usefulness and friendship to others, no matter to which social class they may belong. The important consideration is that this helping of others be regarded not as an obligation but as a privilege, and that the Scout Law be looked upon not as the imposition of the higher authority but as an encouragement and an expression of his own free will.¹⁰ The Scout Motto "Be Prepared" also emphasized on one's readiness and alertness. "Be Prepared" is a play on Baden-Powell's own initials (B-P) but it is not the reason for its adoption.¹¹

When the Scout Spirit, the Scout Law and the Scout Promise are accepted at face value, the Scout Movement necessitates its inclusion in the general pattern of the education system. But in a colonial situation, agitations against the movement is not unexpected when the scout is to promise to do his duty "To God and the King".¹² And while Laxmi Mazumdar, National Commissioner of India in the 1970s, in an article described Scouting and

Guiding as premier youth movements of India based on one of the basic traditional and abiding moral values of our Indian society in that it has never confined its aims and objects or its diverse programme activities to any particular area, interest, class or sect, 13, Blyth specifically believed on the spiritual link which would unite the British Empire. This comparison also shows a change into intentions of the movement in the post-colonial period. However the fear of imperialist tendencies of the people of Assam was not farfetched for Blyth maintains :

Another special interest at the present time is that the overpopulation of this country, in combination with the opposite need of the colonies, points to an increase in immigration. The men who are likely to succeed in such transplantation are those with the colonial instinct sufficiently developed, the result of a training on the lines which scouting suggests.⁽¹⁴⁾

Blyth's statement cannot be disregarded for he had written the book after twelve years of experience with scouts in a large Secondary School. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that it was the defects of the military system as observed by an officer responsible for the training of young soldiers that led to the origination of the scouting scheme. Traces of imperialist tendencies are likely to be inherent in such an organisation.

The very year that the Assamese had agitated against the movement, Baden-Powell came to Delhi for the Indian Jamboree. A scout troop from Assam participated in the Jamboree, performed well in the different events and even won the All India Jamboree Flag. Baden-Powell praised and encouraged the troop from Assam.¹⁴

Curiously enough, in China, the contemporary picture was different. The China Weekly Review contains some inspiring photographs of what Girl Guides do in China. "The Girl Guides of Szechwan," it was stated, "do much more than picnic and parade; they perform national service". In one picture a company of Girl Guides is seen mobilised for road building while in another picture a win some lass prepares a meal for the community. In a third picture, the girls are seen making winter clothing for China's soldiers.¹⁶

This further points out to the fact that the movement could not be accepted in its proper perspective in a colonial situation. It must also be remembered that "it is difficult for an old system to adopt a new one en bloc, there is suspicion of new wine in old bottle!"¹⁷ and the atmosphere of the Scout Promise as well as the salute of the Union Jack was not compatible at a time when

Indian Nationalism was at its height. It is necessary for schools to develop the idea individually in accord with their own circumstances. Baden-Powell's "Scouting for Boys" was originally issued as a series of suggestions for the use of institutions already training boys in a British situation, and therefore could be applied to other countries, only with alterations.

Hence in 1938, another scout organisation, the Hindusthan Scout Association, was formed. In the wave of the national struggle, different Boys' Scout Associations left the former organisations and joined the Hindusthan Scout Association. This new organisation gave equal rights to both boys and girls. Since then, the Boys' Scout Association in India and the Hindusthan Scout Association functioned independently. The Girls' Guide Association also continued on independent lines. In 1947, all differences were put aside and Boys' Scout Association and Hindusthan Scout Association merged into the "Bharat Scouts' and Guides". In 1951, the Girls' Association joined the Bharat Scouts and Guides, and this organisation emerged as the only recognised national organisation of the time ¹⁸

It was therefore obvious that, in a colonial situation, such a movement would never be accepted freely; the Boy Scouts would be alienated from the major student population who was at that time in full support of the Indian National Movement and would never support an organization of the British especially when allegiance is to be made to the King with a salute to the Union Jack !, and alterations had to be made, perforce.

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3. G. P. Ghosh, op. cit, Op. 4.
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8. "B-Ps Letter to Sir Rabindranath Tagore" in *The Bharat Scout & Guide*, Aug. 195 pp. 4-7.

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16. *The China Weekly Review*, Sept 23rd 1939.
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