

## **Sibsagar Town : Spread of English Education in the Colonial Period**

*Punyadhar Gogoi*

After expelling the Myanmarese (Burmese) from Assam in 1826 the British established their Upper Assam headquarters at Sibsagar. In 1830 they shifted their headquarters to Jorhat and till 1838, Jorhat was their administrative centre. By a proclamation in 1839 the entire Upper Assam was divided into two districts, namely, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur. Sibsagar was made the district headquarters and it remained so till 1912 when Jorhat was made the district headquarters. From 1912 to 1947 Sibsagar was the sub-divisional headquarters. This paper intends to assess the growth of literacy amongst the people of Sibsagar town during the period 1826 to 1947.

After their occupation of Assam the British could hardly find a literate person in Assam. To perpetuate their rules, the British felt the necessity of a modern as well as educated elite. The colonial power used education as the vehicle of hegemony in India and it was so in Assam also. Having established their authority on firm footing, the British policy makers felt the need of modern education in Assam. Despite clear idea what the education policy would be, the representative of the colonial power in Assam were too much cautious in this regard. Therefore 'the policy of the people.'<sup>3</sup> Keeping this view in mind David Scott emphasized on the continuation of indigenous system of education. He managed to secure a sanction from his higher authority in 1826 to establish 11 schools to disseminate native system of education. All schools thus established were in Lower Assam. Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam (1834-61) was the first British high official who advocated for English education in Assam. Due to his personal endeavor an English medium school was established at Guwahati.<sup>4</sup>

During this time of educational experiments, Upper Assam was entrusted to Raja Purander Singh in 1833, who ruled Upper Assam upto 1838. Purandar Singh planned to establish schools in the jurisdiction of every Kheldar. But his dream remained unfulfilled, as he was dethroned and Upper Assam brought under direct control of the British.<sup>5</sup>

The credit of establishing the first school at Sibsagar goes to Lt. Broodie, the Principal Assistant. The Guwahati school was too far away for the students of Upper Assam and, therefore, to educate the sons of the Ahom royal family and elites, Lt. Broodie proposed to establish a school at Sibsagar and branch schools at Jorhat and Jaipur. Towards the end of 1840, this proposal was submitted to the general committee of Public Instruction with a request to furnish an estimate of expenditure for the establishment of the schools.<sup>6</sup> The committee responded favourably and agreed to do everything for the establishment of schools in Upper Assam where it became 'very important in a commercial point of view and among a fine race of people at present debased by an almost total want of education'.<sup>7</sup> The committee had urged the Assam authority to make the Guwahati school a central school and to open preparatory schools in Sibsagar, Jaipur and Jorhat to get admission in the Guwahati school for higher study.<sup>8</sup> Thus the first Government school was established in 1841 at Sibsagar with Mr. D'Souza as the headmaster, Ramsagar as assistant master and Urbidhar Sarma as pundit.<sup>9</sup> In this school, secular education was imparted free of cost.<sup>10</sup> There were 117 students in this school taking English education along with Bangalee and Sanskrit.<sup>11</sup> But when the average attendance in Sibsagar English School dwindled in 1844 the Government instructed the local authority to abolish the English medium school and to start a vernacular school where Bangalee was to be used as the vernacular language.<sup>12</sup>

With the introduction of Anglo-vernacular schools, the local school committee of the Sibsagar school was abolished temporarily, but it was revived again in 1858. The Commissioner of Assam was made the sole authority of the education department after the abolition of the committee and the educational set-up was altered by appointing an Inspector for the schools of Assam in April 1844. William Robinson was the first Inspector for the year 1845-46 under whose valuable guidance, the Education Department made valuable progress.<sup>13</sup> In the primary level reading and writing the alphabet, spelling and arithmetic such as addition, multiplication and division and grammar was introduced. Primary education comprised of five classes from Class I to V. Standard books were fixed according to the level of the classes. Education was imparted in the Bangalee language. The following books were included in the syllabus for the primary schools of Sibsagar :

First Class	:	Grammar	:	<i>Ratnamala Byakaran</i>
Second Class	:	Premier	:	<i>Amar Kosh</i>
Third Class	:	Premier	:	<i>Barnamala</i>

In the higher level of education subjects like history, geography, literature, grammar and arithmetic were taught to the students.

The secular character of schooling, along with the Government's promise to reward those who successfully completed the course encouraged the people to receive education. This necessitated the opening of a large number of schools in remote parts of Assam. In 1846-47, there were sixty-five schools in Assam, and the number of schools in Sibsagar district were ten which included one Anglo-vernacular and nine vernacular schools. On October 14, 1844 a resolution was adopted by the Government which increased the enthusiasm of the people for education as it gave a general preference to educated in Government service.<sup>14</sup> But, inspite of the Government effort, progress of education in Assam was not satisfactory. The causes of non-progress of education were the poor attendance, anomalies in curriculum and unavailability of textbooks. In June, 1853, Mr.A.J.M. Mills expressed great concern in this regard.<sup>15</sup>

In 19 July, 1854 the Government of British India accepted the suggestions of Charles Wood. His despatch was known as 'Woods Despatch' Two important features of this despatch were (a) the adoption of vernacular language in the secondary level, (b) the spread of education from lower to Upper level.

In 1855, the Assam Government decided to establish schools for the poor Assamese who were unable to pursue their education. Thus a large number of private schools were established in different parts of Assam in 1855-56. The Sibsagar district had 23 indigenous schools. Priolal Barua, the Sub-Inspector of schools for Upper Assam, took great pain in establishing these schools. Seven schools could fulfill the conditions for grants-in-aid. Another experiment in the field of education was the establishment of subsidy schools. Under this system the teachers who could attract the greater number of pupils to school was to be rewarded. In Sibsagar district this system succeeded remarkably well. Sibsagar school was changed to a secondary school where 77 pupils studied both in English and Bangalee. This school was affiliated to Calcutta University in 1861-62 and was permitted to send up students for Entrance Examination. It was for the first time the students from Assam appeared in the

examination. Four candidates appeared from Sibsagar school and only one named Anandalal Ganguli passed the examination in the second division.<sup>16</sup> In 1873 Bangalee was replaced by Assamese as vernacular and medium of instruction in the schools of Assam. In 1874 a separate Director of Public Instruction was created for Assam.<sup>17</sup>

As far as the educational development of Sibsagar was concerned there were 152 schools of all categories and the pupils numbered 3633.<sup>18</sup> The Sibsagar Government school along with the Jorhat school were the largest schools in Assam and the Sibsagar district was advanced in the case of educational development. According to the census of 1901 the percentage of literacy was only 3.4. In 1903-04 the district had 302 primary and 15 secondary schools.<sup>19</sup> Female literacy was also seen though in limited way.

As far as Sibsagar town is concerned, there was only one high school till the year 1889. In that year, Govinda Chandra Bezbarua established a high school in Sibsagar which school subsequently was known as Bezbarua High School. Bezbarua was one of the pioneers in the Sibsagar district who devoted his life for the education in Sibsagar and he established a number of schools in the neighbouring areas of Sibsagar.<sup>20</sup> There was also law training class at Sibsagar which offered lectures on the courses prescribed for the Law Examinations.<sup>22</sup> A point mentionable here was that the earliest demand for establishment of a college in Assam was raised at Sibsagar in 1860.<sup>23</sup> However, no college was established at Sibsagar prior to 1947. But number of high schools were increased to 5 in this period. The name of the schools were Sibsagar Government High School, the Bezbaruah High School, Assam Polytechnical Institute, Sibsagar Town High School and Phuleswari High School. The Polytechnical Institute was affiliated to the Benaras Hindu University and its students appeared in the Metric Examination from Benaras. There were one M.V.School and five primary schools in the town. The Government Primary School for girls was opened in 1860-61 at Sibsagar by the District Sub-Deputy Inspector of Schools, Utsabananda Barua.<sup>24</sup> For the progress of women education, Ganga Govind Phukan's name is mentionable. In 1870, he established a girls school at Sibsagar and a night school for imparting English knowledge at Sibsagar. Phukan even sent his wife to Kolkata for higher education.<sup>25</sup>

Simultaneously with the efforts of the Government agencies, private efforts were also made to improve the educational system in Assam. In this respect, the most significant role was played by the American Baptist

Missionaries (ABM). Their activities created a niche for Sibsagar in the history of Assam. In 1841, they first appeared in Sibsagar and established a station to disseminate Christian religion. Their contribution to the Assamese people is well known and it is a great history. Between 1841 to 1851 the missionaries in Assam contributed vastly to the field of education. They established primary schools at Sibsagar. In 1844 ABM under Rev. O.T.Cutter set up not less than 14 schools in and around Sibsagar.<sup>26</sup> Assamese was used as medium of instruction and the teachers were also Assamese. Mr. Cutter ran a school in his residence, which comprised of about twenty pupils. English and Assamese were taught in this school.<sup>27</sup>

The following table shows the 14 schools :-

Sl. No.	Name of Village	Name of Teachers	Caste of Teachers	Attendance
1.	Mora Bazar	Bapiram	Ahom	38
2.	Bangaon	Ghinat	Brahmin	48
3.	Kar Gaon	Bhogram	Ahom	18
4.	Soul Korha	Haripad	Kalita	23
5.	Matadang	Sarubapa	Ahom	22
6.	Dhalale	Khaber	Muslim	17
7.	Haub Sara	Beneram	Ahom	37
8.	Serekapara	Hiranath	Ahom	45
9.	Meteka	Bhaulti	Kalita	20
10.	Kalugaon	Mukeswar	Brahmin	31
11.	Kathpora	Bhogpur	Ahom	17
12.	Banmukh	Poka	Ahom	13
13.	Dhupabor	Katiram	Ahom	19
14.	Bokota	Deuram	Ahom	34

In reference to the enthusiasm of the inhabitants for learning in relation to their profession the report of the ABM in 1845 wrote that the residents around Sibsagar sent their children to the school when there was no cultivation season.<sup>28</sup> Another remarkable aspect about the contribution made by ABM was the spread of women education. Mrs. Alisha Brown and Mrs. Cutter started the process of imparting women education

since 1841. They persuaded *Bazar* girls to come to the mission premises to learn reading and writing. Mrs. Brown expressed her joy when two women learned to write and read.<sup>29</sup> In 1850 Sibsagar Girls Boarding School was started under the care of Mrs. Brown.<sup>30</sup> The names of girls of this school were Akisuri (3), Buddhi (12), Jogori (14 or 15), Budhuri (3 or 5), Hupahi (11 or 12), Kunttee Jesrie Mention, Parbati (8), Karomsani.

The printing technology generally hastens the process of modernization and makes it possible for the masses to get education or to be in touch with modern ideas. It is a known fact that the inhabitants of Sibsagar town were fortunate enough to be in touch with this technology in 1843. The ABM installed the first printing machine to disseminate their own religion, no doubt, but that printing machine brought about the renaissance in the life of Assamese. Along with their Christian tract ABM press published large number of books of different categories. The *Buranji* composed by Kashinath Tamuli Phukan saw the light in 1844. Two years later in 1846, ABM published the *Orunodoi*, the first news magazine. This was the outstanding achievement of the ABM. The magazine helped in creating some writers, in Assamese. In Sibsagar town, this magazine brought out some writers like Hemchandra Barua, Dharmakanta Buragohain, Dayaram Chetia, Kinaram Satriya and Purnachandra Sarma.<sup>31</sup> The *Orunodoi* published the names of subscribers from Sibsagar and other places of Assam who were mostly Government employees and foreigners.<sup>32</sup> *Orunodoi* helped to create an atmosphere of rational outlook amongst the people of Sibsagar town as it is seen that a number of social organizations came up in the town. The first organization ever known at Sibsagar was the *Gyansabha*.<sup>33</sup> Both Indian and foreign gentlemen attended the Sabha and discussed the evil effects of opium on the Assamese society.<sup>34</sup> Towards the close of 1855 the *Assam Desh Hitaishini Sabha* was formed. *Assam Gyan Pradayini Sabha* was formed in 1857. Due to the expansion of education a intelligentsia was formed at Sibsagar, who in turn became conscious of their multiple grievances. Therefore large number of social organizations came up at Sibsagar in different phases of time till 1947. This development of heterogeneous organizations was possible only due to the growth of literacy in the town. In 1928-29, another news magazine was published from Sibsagar. The name of the magazine was *Ghar-Jeuti*, which was a women's journal and published articles relating women.

From the time of the British advent in 1826 the growth of western education in Assam hastened the process of the formation of an

intellectual class. This neo-intellegentia forwarded manifold grievances through different channels to higher authority. The western education and literacy helped in this regard. It appears that Sibsagar's literary growth was remarkable during the colonial period.

#### *Notes and Reference*

1. B.C. Allen, *et.al*, *Gazetteer of Bengal and North East India*, Delhi, 1980, p. 589.
2. Nagen Saikia, *Background of Modern Assamese Literature*, New Delhi, 1988, p. 97.
3. *Ibid*, p. 98
4. H.K. Barpujari, *A Short History of the Higher Education in Assam*, Guwahati, 1952, p. 4.
5. *Ibid*, p.8.
6. Meena Sarma Borkakati, *British Administration in North East India (1826-1874)*, Delhi, 1985, p. 19
7. *Ibid*.
8. *Ibid*.
9. Barpujari, *op. cit*, p. 8
10. Borkakati, *op. cit*, p. 4
11. *Ibid*
12. *Ibid*, p.18
13. *Ibid*
14. *Ibid*, p.47.
15. A.J.M.Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam*, Guwahati, 1984, pp. 24-25.  
Mill was the judge of Sadar Dewani Adalat, Kolkatta and was sent to Assam for a survey for general progress of Assam. He expressed his great concern about the education policy followed in Assam and advocated Assamese as medium of instruction.
16. Archana Chakravarty, *History of Education in Assam*, Dehli, 1989, pp. 23-30
17. Borpujari, *op.cit*, p.18.
18. W.W.Hunter,, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Delhi, 1974, pp. 273-74.

19. B.C.Allen : *Assam District Gazetteer*, Sibsagar Distict, New Delhi, 1905, p. 229.

In 1881, the number of male literate per 1000 for all ages was only 31. In next decades the figures were 81 (1881), 79 (1901), 122 (1911), 160 (1921), 178 (1931). Female literate 1 (1881) and 18 (1931).

The percentage of male and female pupils in the schools of Sibsagar district during 1886-1940 were as follows:

Year	Male	Female
1886-87	22.58	1.90
1895-96	28.94	1.61
1904-05	25.52	0.39
1909-10	34.36	2.24
1919-20	5.54	0.56
1939-40	9.90	2.28

20. *Sibsagar District Gazetteer*, 1967, p.347.
21. Allen, *op. cit.*, p.589.
22. *An Account of the province of Assam, 1901-02*, Shillong, 1903, p.62.
23. *Sibsagar District Gazetteer*, p.348.
24. H.K.Barpujari : *Political History of Assam Vol.I, 1826-1919*, Guwahati, 1977, pp. 129-303
25. Benudhar Sarma, *Ganga Govinda Phukan, Guwahati*, 1948, p.54.
26. Barpujari, *op. cit.*, p.10.
27. Borkataki, *op. cit.*, p.97.
28. H.K.Barpujari, *The American Missionaries and North East India (1836-1900)*, New Delhi, 1985, pp.102-03
29. F.W.Brown. *The Whole World Kin, Philadelphia*, 1890, p.253
30. Barpujari *op. cit.*, p.117.
31. Nanda Talukdar, *Sambad Patrar Rod Kanchalit Asamiya Sahitya*, Guwahati, 1975, pp. 13-15.
32. Prakashan Parishad, *Orunodoi*, Guwahati, 1983, pp.1122-86.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*