

Study Material-1

History of Assam (1826-1947) 6th semester Major Paper : 6.2 Unit-IV

Unit-IV : i) Political Awakening : Education, Press, Public Associations

‘Colonial rule in Assam triggered a series of sweeping changes, not only in its polity and economy, but in its society and culture as well. The British brought with them new institutions, knowledge, ideas, technology, beliefs and values. Within a few years of their occupation of Assam, they had laid the foundations of a modern state by surveying the land, settling revenue collection, creating a bureaucracy of officials, codifying the new law and instituting law courts, introducing western education, establishing industries, and a communication network, thereby opening her up to the outside world’.¹

a) **Progress of Western Education** : One of the most significant impact of the British rule in India was the opening up of a new intellectual world for the people of Assam by introducing English education.

Assam had remained, by and large, fairly isolated till British entry into the valley. But there was a system of education as is evident from a mass of literary and religious works that have survived. The survival of a number of *tols* till recently also unmistakably shows the existence of a system of education which was not very different from the rest of the country. Some young boys went to Nawadip or Benaras which were centres of classical learning at that time. However the education that was imparted in these institutions was primarily religious in nature. During the Ahom rule, education was confined to priestly class only.

i) **Establishment of Primary Schools** : Jenkin strongly believed that it was imperative on the part of the government to educate and train the Assamese people to take up the responsibility of the local offices. Schools imparting English education were set up at each of the *Sadar* stations of Guwahatin Darrang, Nawgong and Biswanath. The general belief that knowledge of English was necessary for employment in the government sector led to the establishment of more than 600 such schools in different parts of Assam in 1841. The quality of education that was imparted in these schools was very elementary.

James Matthie , the Collector of Gauhati, was the forerunner of establishing anglo vernacular primary education in Assam. Apart from primary schools, he founded secondary and collegiate schools as well. Secondary schools were classed as high and middle schools. Middle schools were further categorized as English and Middle Vernacular schools.

Christian Missionaries rendered invaluable service in spreading modern education in Assam. The American Baptist Mission was the most active among the missions in the Brahmaputra valley. Their main aim was evangelization. Within two months of their arrival at Sadiya, two Baptist Missionaries, Nathan Brown and Oliver T. Cutter started a school with an initial enrollment of six students which soon rose to 20. In the following years they established several other schools in the vicinity and one each at Jaipur and Namchang. By

1844, they set up 11 schools in Sibsagar district and 5 at Gauhati along with an Orphanage at Nowgong for orphan and destitute children. The students were taught reading, writing, arithmetic and elements of geography apart from religious teachings. There was a growing demand for these mission schools because the education imparted there opened up various avenues for employment.

The Christian Missionaries also started schools for girls, where besides imparting lessons on general education, they also taught sewing, knitting, embroidery and handicrafts.

ii) Higher Education in Colonial Assam : The scope for quality higher education in Assam was limited and so students who wanted to pursue their studies had no alternative but to go to Calcutta. Continued representations to the government for the establishment of a collegiate school at Gauhati eventually bore fruits in 1865 when the school of Gauhati was upgraded to a collegiate school with a grant of 12,000 rupees per annum. But the number of successful candidates at the entrance examination was so small that it was not economically viable to maintain the school and a few years later the collegiate section was abolished.

a) Setting up of Colleges : It was only in the closing years of the 19th century that Assamese was gradually introduced in the primary and middle schools. There was also a rapid expansion of institutions for secondary education and a successful agitation culminated in the foundation of a College, the Cotton College at Gauhati in 1901. By the first quarter of the 20th century, another college, the Murari Chand College, that had been set up in Sylhet in 1892, was affiliated to a number of courses of Calcutta University. The girls were admitted into the college from the academic session of 1929-30.

b) Law and Medical Colleges : Colleges for other professional courses were also set up by the beginning of the 20th century. The Earle Law College was established at Gauhati in 1914. From 1914 to 1947 it was affiliated to Calcutta University. In 1948, it came under the jurisdiction of Gauhati University. Gnanadabhiram Barua was the first principal of this college.

The medical education similarly made a slow and hesitant start. The John Berry White Medical School was set up at Dibrugarh in 1900 almost entirely on private initiative. It was the first medical college in Northeastern India. In course of time much of the expenditure incurred was borne by the government. It turned out every year many Assamese as medical practitioners. The institution however trained up students upto Sub-Assistantship, and for higher studies Assamese students were required to resort to the Medical College in Calcutta.

c) Technical Education : The Hunter Commission of 1882 had recommended the need for establishing indigenous schools. But technical and industrial education received little attention in Assam. The establishment of the Prince Wales Technical Schools at Jorhat in 1927, initiated by a donation of 100,000 rupees by the family of Jagannath Barooah, was the first step in the direction of imparting some form of mechanical training. By 1929, there were only seven technical institutes in the whole of the northeast imparting elementary training in skills, such as weaving, woodwork, and metal work.

d) Process of establishing a University : For a long time, the only university in the entire eastern region was at Calcutta. Over the years this caused resentment among educated Assamese youth and the necessity of a university was acutely felt. Assam put forward her

claim to the government for a separate university in 1917. From then representations and petitions on the issue were presented to the government from time to time. In the backdrop of growing nationalism in the country, the government was eventually forced to concede to the demand of the people and the Gauhati University was incorporated by an Act of 1947.

Conclusion : The progress of modern western education in Assam was, thus, very slow. Much time had been initially wasted by imposing a foreign medium of instruction which in effect put the clock back by almost half a century. Nevertheless, within a century of British occupation, a completely new system of education had been firmly established.

References :

1. Goswami, Priyam : The History of Assam (From Yandabo to Partition, 1826-1947), Reprint-2009, p.197.
