

Language, Education and Identity: The Assamese Renaissance under Baptist Missionary

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Abstract-

The paper looks at the crucial transformation of the language and education of Assam during the wake of the Assam renaissance. The nineteenth century is marked to have kindled a deep sense of emancipation and played a pivotal role in evaluation of the cultural and intellectual history of Assam. The American Baptist Missionary played an important role in the history of Assam and bringing in the renaissance during the nineteenth century. The paper underlines how the British missionaries carried out the momentous changes of the region in the field of education, print, press and language leading to the creation of its distinct linguistic identity. Since no corroborative indigenous data regarding the activities of the missionaries in Assam is found, thus the study is based on the earliest church records of Rev. Miles Bronson and other secondary sources. With the establishment of vernacular schools, translation of religious and secular works and the introduction of printing press helped expand literacy in Assam. This encouraged the use of Assamese language in formal learning, while the publication of Orunadoi further created a new intellectual sphere fostering literary growth and linguistic consciousness forming its own identity to the Assamese people. The developments brought by the Baptist missionary collectively stimulated a broader cultural awakening which laid the foundation of modern Assamese literature and identity formation. This study examines how the Baptist missionary role in the education and linguistic initiative contributed to the Assamese renaissance and argues that the missionary's intervention despite its colonial and religious framework, became a catalyst in the shaping of modern Assamese society.

Keywords: renaissance, education, assamese language, press, identity, baptist missionary etc.

Introduction:

The nineteenth century was a historical moment in the colonial incorporation of Assam by British India which marked as a landmark and watershed for social reform movement in India as well as in Assam. The Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 passed the control of Assam into the hands of the East India Company. The region underwent immense transformation in its socio-political and economic ethos. British interest in securing access to Northeast for colonial trade expansion coincided with the missionary imagination in the Northeast led to its significant

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development that occurred with the coming of the East India Company was the arrival of the Baptist missionaries in Assam and the initiation they took in the field of education. The reformation of the society through the spread of education and evangelism through missionaries started after their arrival. Though, the number of converts did not exceed more than a dozen by 1830, the main aim of the missionaries at first was to pacify few tribes of northeast like Singphos and the Khamtis. Thus, Assam became the area of imbue of the American Baptist Missionaries.

The Assamese Renaissance was not merely a literary revival but carries a broader concept of intellectual awakening. This involves the missionary enterprise and the indigenous involvements. With it began the preservation and the reinforcing of linguistic and cultural identity by the Assamese intellectuals. This period is often regarded as the beginning of the Assamese renaissance. This period emerged as the collaborative yet contested process that constructed the foundations of modern Assamese society and identity. The recent work on the transformation of Assamese identity, Misra writes as,

“The answer to the question as to who an Assamese opens up so many possibilities today that it has become necessary to attempt a historical survey and analysis of the rather contentious issue of Assamese identity. Opinions regarding Assamese identity today range from those who subscribe to the view that there is no such Assamese identity to all those who still continue to claim that such an identity is not restricted only to the native speakers of the Assamese language but embrace all those who come within the broader fold of Assamese culture and the process of Assamese nationality formation is still not complete.”¹

The paper is a study on the interconnected relationship between language, education and identity brought by the Assamese Renaissance under the influence of the Baptist missionaries. It seeks to analyse how missionary interventions contributed to the development of modern Assamese language, educational institutions, print culture and the construction of Assamese identity.

Literature Review:

The nineteenth century marks as a pivotal period in Assam’s intellectual and cultural history. It embarks as the beginning of the renaissance in Assam that has evolved through the language development, education and culture brought by the contribution of the Baptist missionaries. Edward Gait in his book ‘A History of Assam’ mentions the role of the Baptist missionaries in reviving the Assamese language after its disposal as official language by the Bengali language in 1836 while giving a comprehensive and detailed account of Assam’s political and cultural history. Another renown historian S.K. Bhuyan highlights in his book ‘Studies in the History of Assam’ the importance of historical tradition emphasizing the influence the missionaries’ education and printing press carried in fostering the intellectual development that led to the renaissance in Assam.

Birinchi Kumar Barua in his book ‘History of Assamese Literature’ gives a comprehensive survey of the development of Assamese literature. He endorsed in his writing how the

¹ The Transformation of Assamese Identity: A Historical Survey, H. K. Barpujari

missionaries especially through the publication of 'Orunadoi' played an immense role in modernizing Assamese literature as well as journalism. His book is a demonstration of how language became central to the growth of Assamese identity. Meanwhile Maheswar Neog explores the cultural and literary history of Assam in his work 'Essays on Assamese Literatures'. His book gives ample recognition to the Baptist missionaries for the revival of literature while stressing the role of indigenous literary and religious traditions in shaping the Assamese culture and identity.

Methodology:

The research paper adopts a historical, analytical and qualitative research methodology that examines the role of Baptist missionaries in bringing the renaissance in Assam that transformed the language, education and identity of the land. The study focuses on the emergence of the renaissance during the nineteenth century with application of historical analysis method to trace the development. Interpretive analysis is also being followed to understand the relationship between, language, education and the formation of Assamese identity through it. The study is mainly confined to the nineteenth century period in Assam where the influence of Assamese renaissance led to the language standardisation, educational development through establishment of schools and printing press. The research is based both on primary and secondary sources like the missionary reports, government reports, books, journals, articles etc. for a systematic framework on understanding the initiatives and contributions of the missionaries.

Results and Discussions:

The annexation of Assam after the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo, marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Assam. With it also marks the beginning of significant political, social and cultural transformation. Modern education, printing technology and missionary activities transformed the Assamese society into entering into a new era called the Assamese Renaissance. In the early days of settlement, the East India Company, thus, made constant efforts to prevent the settlement of missionaries, and followed the principle of what they called "non- interference" in the religious life of their Indian subjects. This was altered only by the introduction of the Charter Act of 1813, which permitted the granting of residence licenses to those wishing to promote the religious and moral improvement of the Indian people. By the 1820s, there was a slow growth of evangelical influence among the younger generation of civil and military officers posted more recently in India, which led to the creation of circumstances, where the Company officials regarded the missionaries with sympathy rather than the previous feeling of derision

and alarm (Avril Powell). However, there were reasons more than just evangelism that made the local authority to welcome the missionaries in Assam. Nevertheless the future of missionary activities in the region was devised by reasons of a much wider spectrum (Anupam Ghosh). Captain Jenkins had invited the American Baptists to the region, as he believed that only through the spread of the gospel could the Khamtis and the Singpho tribes could be pacified who were proving a great threat to the tranquility on the frontier (H.K. Barpujari).

Baptist Missionary With the course of time, the Christian missionaries had been initiated for the upliftment of women as well as the depressed class. The missionary's educational effort in Assam got initiated in the early 19th century with the British Baptist Missionaries starting a mission in 1826 after coming under the British rule in February 24, 1826. But it was the American Baptist Missionaries who took the initiative of spreading Christianity in northeast. Mr. Jenkins, the then Commissioner of Assam was much interested in evangelism. He felt that the backward hill people were really in need of a spiritual reformation and education. So he sent an invitation to Reverend W. H. Pearce of the British Missionary Society in Calcutta. But Reverend Pearce sent the American Baptist Missionaries instead of the British Missionaries. Accordingly, two American Baptist Missionaries, Reverend Nathan Brown and Reverend Cutter were sent. They reached Sadiya on March 23, 1836 and with them came the printing press in Sadiya for the first time. With the interest of the propagation of Christianity, the missionaries epitomized a revolution of literary formation of the Assamese language, which played a significant role in influencing a number of enthusiastic western educated young intellectuals of Assam who contributed to the foundation of modern Assamese literature starting with the publication of Orunadoi. For the spread of gospels among the tribes, few books were printed in their language for the preparatory of establishing schools in their villages. To further spread gospel and education Miles Bronson along with Mr. Thomas proceeded towards the Brahmaputra but due to the untimely death of Mr. Thomas, Bronson reached down Jaypur to commence work amongst the Singpho tribals and Shans. Thereafter Bronson paid attention to the Nagas at Namsang where he started a school and prepared some elementary books in their language. But due to ill health Bronson could not stay for long among the Nagas and work for them due to ill-health. He left the Nagas and settled down at Nowgong (present Nagaon) where he baptised the first Assamese convert Nidhiram who later came to be known as Nidhi Levi Farwell.

The missionary zeal was carried out ceaselessly with the help of the few European community and the first Baptist church was established at Gauhati (now Guwahati) in December 1845 followed with branches at Nowgong and Sibsagar. Development of education in Assam During the British occupation of Assam in 1826, it was difficult to find a person who could read and write since education was mostly confined to the priestly section. The progress of education was too distressingly slow; infact no serious attempt was made at any level to introduce a system of liberal education. It was far-sighted Jenkins who had realized for the first time the urgent necessity of imparting English education amongst the Assamese. The British Government had to bring people from the neighbouring province like Calcutta for the smooth functioning of the government. Realising the necessity of recruiting the native people for administration, the missionaries started schools both literary and vocational for the boys and girls. Besides spreading the gospel, they wanted to work for the upliftment of the society, so they also opened hospitals and orphanage for the people of Assam. Scott procured the sanction of the Government of Bengal to establish a number of schools in Upper and Lower Assam in 1826 for the promotion of indigenous education. Development of secondary education can be traced back in 1826 while the first English school in Assam was established at Guwahati by the General Committee of Public Instruction in Bengal on 15th June 1835. The school was known as the Gauhati Seminary which at present is the Cotton Collegiate School. By January 1845,

the missionaries established fourteen schools under the Sibsagar Baptist Mission in both vernacular studies as well as English. Realising that the schools were the mode of evangelism, the real opposition came from the Assamese Brahmins becoming an obstacle for the flow of the evangelism. In early March 1835, the Governor-General in Council finally resolved upon the promotion of European literature and science amongst the natives of India through the medium of the English language. The proposal of the Commissioner which had reached the authorities in Calcutta at this precise moment therefore readily received the approval of the General Committee of Public Instruction. To begin with, the latter recommended in June 1835 the establishment of an English school at Gauhati and deputed as its Headmaster Mr. Singer had its start on a salary of Rs. 150 p.m. In 1841, another English School had its start at Sibsagar with Mr. D. S'ouza as its Headmaster. When the portals of public service were opened to those educated, the higher classes were not slow to take advantage of the English education. To cater their growing demand, branch schools had also to be started in the neighbourhood of Gauhati, and their enrolment at the close of 1841 exceeded six hundred. In the meantime William Robinson, who had been working under the Serampur Mission replaced Singer as the Headmaster of the Gauhati School, and two teachers were added to teach Sanskrit and Persian.

The American Baptist Missionaries were the real pioneer for the women's education in Assam. After a short period of their stay they set up a school for girls at Sadiya. The missionaries took up the cause of removing illiteracy in women besides spreading gospel. From the beginning the missionary wives took up the charge of setting up and running the missionary schools. They also played their role in social upliftment with attempt being made by the missionaries to gather homeless orphaned children when they found out that the local Assamese were reluctant in sending their children to school set up by the missionaries. The school also offered asylum to poor and destitute children. The American Baptist Missionaries started the first school for girls in Assam in 1844 at Sibsagar. This was followed by two other girl schools at Nowgong and Gauhati. Going to school by girls at that time was however still an uncommon sight in the society. The impact of the foreign ideas had already produced amongst a few liberal minded Assamese a rationalistic approach which made itself apparent in their political thought and political outlook. Haliram Dhekial Phukan stands at the top at this new era. Even in the age of extreme conservatism, he advocated for the cause of women's education which was further supported by his son Anandaram Dhekial Phukan. Education of women had been the main focus for the American Baptist Missionaries in Assam. A chief feature of the Nowgong Orphan Institute had been that it had brought the female students within its fold along with the male students. A boarding school for girls was also established at Gauhati by Mrs. Barker. A similar girls' boarding school was also established at Sibsagar. It started with enrolling 9 students who were kept under the supervision of Mrs. Brown. In 1857, the missionaries directed their attention to the backward remote areas of Assam and opened some schools in the district of Darrang for the Mikirs, Kacharis and other tribes. The contribution made by the Christian Missionaries to the vernacular schools in Assam, the tribal areas in particular, though inspired by the zeal of evangelism was unparalleled indeed. By 1844 the American Baptist Missionaries under O.T. Cutter set up as many as fourteen schools in Sibsagar. Schools were opened for boys and girls as well in Nowgong, Garo hills and in the Kachari mahals of the district of Darrang.

The introduction of printing press by the American Baptist Missionary in 1836 at Sadiya revolutionized the literary world in Assam. Printed books, newspaper, magazines and articles promoted dissemination of knowledge and modern ideas. It strengthened linguistic consciousness by popularising the Assamese language in print besides preserving and standardising the Assamese language through books, dictionaries and periodicals.

The Baptist Missionaries made invaluable contribution to the Assamese language and literature. Brown, Bronson and Farwell laid the foundation of the Christian-Assamese literature. In 1846, the American Baptist Missionaries started the publication of a native monthly newspaper Orunadoi Sambad Patra from the Sibsagar Mission Press. It was the first vernacular newspaper in Assamese. The first monthly Orunadoi was on religion, science and general intelligence. Through this paved the way for western thoughts and intellectual awakening in the younger generations. Bronson's monumental work Dictionary in Assamese and English was published from Baptist mission Press, Sibsagar in 1867, the earliest of its kind until 1900. Brown translated the New Testament into Assamese, published his Grammatical Notes on the Assamese Language in 1848 and collected a good number of Assamese manuscripts. He also wrote on history, arithmetic and geography. Nidhi Levi is credited with a historical work, a number of story books and the rendering into Assamese of the Indian Penal Code.

In 1836, the English East India introduced Bengali as a medium of instruction instead of Assamese in the schools and court of Assam. The reason for such an act was that during that time there were very few Assamese with educational qualification as well as experience which was necessary in order to work in the new British administrative system. Even though Bengali was used as a medium of instruction in the government schools, the schools run by the missionaries used Assamese as the medium of instruction. Anandaram Dhekial Phukan was the first among the Assamese to raise a voice of protest against the introduction of Bengali in place of Assamese in the schools and courts in Assam, and he is said to have effectively refuted in 1855 in an anonymous pamphlet entitled 'A few Remarks on the Assamese Language', the prevailing notion of that age that Assamese was only a dialect of the Bengali and had no literature of its own. The colonial rulers introducing Bengali as medium of instruction set the sentiments of the masses on fire. Later due to unrelenting efforts of American Baptist Missionaries, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Hemchandra Baruah, Gunabhiram Baruah and others, Assamese was reinstated as the medium of instruction in 1873.

Findings of the Study:

The nineteenth century in Assam was a period of transition. The Assamese Renaissance period brought significant period of intellectual, literary development and socio-cultural development leading to the formation of its identity. The role of Baptist missionaries goes beyond religious activities but played key role in reviving and standardising the Assamese language, modern education and regional identity. The research further indicates that the developments by the missionaries in educational initiatives contributed to the emergence of an educated Assamese class that became a driving force behind literary, cultural and social reform movements bringing about the modern outlook. The establishment of printing press in Assam was a turning point that totally transformed the literary and intellectual landscape of Assam.

Conclusion:

Language emerged as a central marker of Assamese identity during the nineteenth century. The credit goes to the untiring effort of the missionaries' defence of Assamese language against the dominance of Bengali language that contributed to the revival of the linguistic consciousness. The use of missionary educational resources including the print culture by the Assamese intellectuals that preservation of language, promotion of literature and conserving the cultural identity became possible. The role of Assamese scholars and intellectual can never be undermined in bringing the renaissance in Assam. It was possible only through their active participation in the process of cultural and literary revival, although initiation was done by the Baptist missionaries. It is through the interaction between the missionary initiatives and indigenous leadership that resulted in the emergence of a modern Assam.

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