American Baptist Missionaries and Education in Jorhat

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Abstract

The arrival of the British had led to various establishments that can be considered as beneficial to certain extent. The American Baptist Missionaries, with the permission of the Britishers landed in Jorhat and in their terms of service became fundamental in creating an educational sphere that catered to all classes of society and gender. They were also monumental in promoting vocational education. This paper will explore the contributions of the American Baptist missionary in Jorhat in relation to education and its development of public sphere.

Keywords: American Baptist Missionaries, Education, Jorhat, Public Sphere

The Industrial Revolution in Europe, especially in Britain, by the second half of the 18th century, created much cultural, psychological and moral trauma amongst the working class¹ and it was within this class that the evangelical Christian movements found their most enthusiastic adherents. The revival of religious movements was, in a way, the by-product of advancing industrialism, an attempt to create a new ethic for a new society.² This Christian revivalism engendered among the populace, a new fervor and passionate moral solemnity coupled with a great concern for the ‘unsaved’ and ‘neglected’ sections of British society.

which eventually grew into an anxiety about the deliverance of the ‘heathen masses’ in Britain’s colonies.

This resulted in the formation of many missionary societies hoping to take their faith to distant countries and if the missions did not precede the colonial movement; they did follow the heels of the colonial power³, giving to history the cliché, ‘The Cross follows the Crown’. The symbiotic bond that colonialism and evangelism often shared, led most colonized people to view the colonial state as both priest and politician. However, the relationship between the colonial state and missionary organisations was not one of straightforward cooperation. The relationship between a colonial government and any mission operating in the same territory differed from country to country and mission to mission and depended on the historical situation.

The narrative of the Indian subcontinent in this context runs on a rather different trajectory as the Company’s attitude towards missionary work was, for the most part, one of indifference. In contrast to Portugal and Spain where state-sponsored missionary activities were ubiquitous, the East India Company, which in itself was an independent enterprise, did not have a clear-cut alignment with the Cross. When it assumed political power in 1757 in India, the Company’s government was purely motivated by commercial interest and continued to view missionary activities in India with disfavor. This also led them to marginalize missionaries because of a presumed fear that missionary preaching would likely create a hostile atmosphere which could affect the stability of the Company’s rule and its profits.

With the ulterior motive of tracing a route to China and Tibet, the first missionaries to tour the Brahmaputra Valley were the Jesuit missionaries, Stephan Cacells and J Gabral. It

was because of their efforts that two Catholic churches came up in the Mughal garrison of Rangamati in the Goalpara district of lower Assam in 1696 but these disappeared when Goalpara was ceded to the East India Company by the Mughals in 1765. With the annexation of the territory by the British colonizers, the first appearance of the Christian missionaries was from the Serampore Mission, when James Rae, initially a government officer who later engaged in fulltime missionary work, arrived in July 1829 at Gauhati with his family. Following his lead, Mr Robinson arrived in Gauhati and continued preaching and educating people. However, this arrangement did not last for long and the Serampore Mission finally gave up the task of evangelizing Assam. With this, the responsibility of bringing the Word to Assam fell upon the American Baptist Missionaries, the most proximate of which were stationed at Burma at the time.

The American Baptist Missionaries arrived in India and proceeded to Burma by the early decades of the nineteenth century. With the occupation of Assam by the British after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, the British through the English Baptists sent a letter of invitation to the American Baptist Missionaries in Burma to preach Christianity in Assam. There was, thus, an official invitation sent out to them by the government of the East India Company, through the English Baptist church at Calcutta.

Mr. Pearce, the secretary of the English Baptists, wrote to the missionaries in Rangoon: “It appears evident that an effectual door is opened for the establishment of a branch of your mission to the northeast of Assam. I must confess I shall feel truly happy if

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4 Dena, Christian, 18.
you feel inclined to enter it. Its geographical situation with relation to your mission seems to render it particularly desirable.  

Nathan Brown, one of the missionaries in Burma, when approached as to his willingness to make the attempt, “embraced the proposal with instant enthusiasm.” Responding to this seemingly providential opening, Rev Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter with their printing press were sent from Burma and by 1836 were seen commencing their work at Sadiya among the Khamtis and Shans. By April 1837, Miles Bronson, another American missionary, with his wife Ruth Bronson started his work at Jaipur, the first Ahom capital, when an insurrection among the Khamtis at Sadiya razed the place down and Brown and Cutter were compelled to move to Jaipur.

As these missionaries, whose primary objective was to proselytize, started their work among the Shans, Khamtis, Singhpos and the Assamese, they encountered an important problem: the inability of the natives to read and write. These missionaries saw their principal task as disseminating the gospels and the illiteracy of the locals made the dissemination of the Bible or anything related to Christian literature near impossible.

“The Gospel alone can restore them. But the Gospel must be communicated. Almost of necessity the written page needs to follow the preached Word. Such has been God’s plan in all history. Hence the absolute necessity of education among savages as a chief handmaid to religion. Little call would there be, by a people who cannot read, for Scriptures and Christian Literature”.  

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7 Sword, *Baptist*, 43.
The missionaries on realizing this, started from the basics by establishing schools in all their mission stations. The British Indian government approved this effort of the mission to take up the responsibility of education and subsidized their functioning with a small grant. Arriving on 23rd March 1836 at Sadiya, the Browns and Cutters within a period of two months established a primary school to teach a class of students some thirty or forty strong to read in English, Assamese and Tai. Arithmetic and Geography were also taught mostly from memory due to the unavailability of books. Students had to repeat from memory their daily lessons from the parables of Christ in Assamese and to read the Gospel of Matthew in English.

On similar lines a number of schools of various grades were opened at Nowgaon, Gauhati and Sibsagar, a few of which were also opened with the contribution of the Gossains, the generic term for a priest at a naamghar. Although in the initial stages the process of school building was a top-down phenomenon, as the natives began to realize the value of these schools, educational initiatives began to come from the Assamese as well. Instances where 30 young men from the Garo hills came on foot to Gauhati to ask for books and to appeal the missionaries to visit their villages are examples of the locals embracing the new trend of modern education, which was by then becoming an important route to a government job. The work of the missionaries also revolved around the training of teachers.\textsuperscript{10}

By the late 1880s most of these schools were either run with the aid of the natives such as the tea planters or with minimal government grants, or through funds raised by local churches. Such funds would also take care of the regular expenses of the school, along with other occasional constructional work ranging from school building to teachers’ quarters.

\textsuperscript{10}Sangma, \textit{History Vol II}, 4-5.
With the turn of the century the educational works of the American Baptist Missionaries began gaining official recognition. The Chief Commissioner of Assam on his visit to Nowgaon in March 1903 was quite overwhelmed with their efforts and instructed the missionaries to develop a training school for the Mikirs in the Nowgaon Mission. Apart from this they were also instructed to prepare textbooks in the Mikir language written in Roman characters. On the successful completion of the given task on April 1st, 1904, the government grant given to the missionaries were increased from Rs 900 to Rs 1500 annually.11

As the years rolled by, great advances were made in the field of missionary education and in 1908 the Kamrup Baptist Association appointed an Inspector of Schools to visit various schools thrice a year to inspect their functioning and to look into various other tasks. This appointment is also indicative of the seriousness and dedication towards the task undertaken by the missionaries which was not just to construct schools and fill them with students but to create a class of people who could understand the significance of Christianity as well as a class conscious of its socio-political and economic surroundings. This period and the initiatives of the missionaries also led to the growth of women’s education.

Mrs. Brown wrote: “The female members of the church and my little school of women and girls, have occupied much of my time and attention during the past season. Two of the women – one a member of the church (last baptized) – finished “The First Reading Book” to-day – a great day for Assam!”12 As early as 1851 the work of these missionaries helped emancipate women by giving the women an opportunity to acquire education.

“The women are so stupid after having grown up in their ignorance, that they are fully impressed with the belief that they cannot learn; besides the ridicule to which they are

11 Phillip H. Moore, Report from Nowgong Field, Missionary Conference, December, 1904- January 1905
subjected makes it very difficult to induce them to continue. Our old Brahmin pandit often comes along by my little school room, and laughs at the idea of my spending my time teaching women to read.”

Mrs. Brown’s testimony also revealed the condition of the Assamese society, in particular its attitude towards women who were otherwise regarded as the very embodiment of culture and tradition. Traditional Assamese society framed women as the nurturing guardians of the domestic sphere. The missionaries in a subtle manner created conditions that helped to subvert this notion of women as the personification of customs and morality. They created an environment that gave women a taste of modern urban culture, that could be acquired through modern education.

“In Assam not one in a hundred of the common people can read the books issued from our press. And the whole influence of the priest and the Hindoo religion is to keep the people in ignorance. The most effective way of defeating the purpose of the Brahmins is not to attack them personally, but to enlighten the masses.”

The activities of the missionaries were equally focused on the education of both sexes. However, achieving this was difficult because of the ingrained prejudices of the higher classes, the state of native society, and the long-standing subordination of the female sex. The silence of their press in the initial stages made the task harder and the only resort was to:

“establish village schools, to impart to the common people a plain vernacular education”

The use of Assamese over Bengali, which was the medium of instruction in the government schools, to educate people in their schools, was the most effective way to attract

13 Barpujari, American, 107-108.
15 Barpujari, American, 108.
the natives. In effect, the missionaries played a crucial role in reviving Assamese as a language of learning and communication and thus strengthening the notion of an Assamese identity. Along with imparting education in the vernacular, the Baptists also attempted to make education holistic by incorporating in their curriculum activities such as spinning, weaving, cutting and making articles of clothing usually worn in the region.

The work of the missionaries bulked very large in the field of medicine. The establishment of mission hospitals opened the gates of modern medicine to the locals and also overcame native hostility to western medicine. The missionaries successfully recast the image of western medicine and managed to eradicate the idea that it was an instrument of cultural subordination. Realizing the sensitivity of Indian cultures, an all-women’s hospital with female missionary doctors from the United States and nurses was established at Gauhati in 1925.\footnote{M M. Marvin, *Report on Woman’s Hospital, Jorhat Conference*, December 2-10, 1926}

The demand for schools and mission work could be seen as early as 1842: “Around Jorhath in particular, we were beset in almost every street, and at every corner, by twenty voices at a time, “We want a school – will you establish among us a school?”\footnote{Tour Observation by Cutter, February 22, 1842, reprinted in Barpujari, American, 106.} This was not an exaggeration. The beginning of missionary work with its attendant impact on urbanisation and the urban public sphere, began in Jorhat with the arrival of Rev. S.A.D Boggs in 1905.\footnote{Ontimetta M. Rao, “The American Baptist Mission Work at Jorhat: A Brief Review”, *Jorhat 200*, (Calcutta, 1997), 124.}

The first activity of the missionaries was the establishment of a church and a primary boarding school in April 1906 and 1909 respectively. The construction of both institutions contributed directly to the development of Jorhat’s built heritage. The boarding school played a significant role in the development of a conscious urban public sphere among the natives.
The school evolved into a high school affiliated to Calcutta University\(^{19}\), and brought to most people of the town and its vicinity, as far as Nagaland, access to modern urban English education, which until then was available either at Calcutta or Guwahati. Apart from being a valued institution that handed out degrees of matriculation, this school became an agent of modern urban consciousness and mentalities, giving to its students a plethora of ideas to learn and discourse on, as well as new and alien physical activities and games like football.

Collectively known as the Jorhat Christian Schools\(^{20}\), of which the Jorhat Christian Industrial School was a part, along with the Jorhat Christian High School and the Jorhat Christian Bible School, the first of the three was the only industrial establishment of the American missionaries. Two years after the arrival of Reverend and Mrs. Boggs at Jorhat, in May 1908, the industrial department was started at Jorhat with the avowed purpose of furnishing employment to young men who were willing to work to support themselves while in school.\(^{21}\) Although until 1910 carpentry was the only trade taught in the initial phase, by 1911 it was reported that apart from the furniture, doors and windows which were regularly supplied to government officials, tea planters, missionaries and local gentlemen and to other parts of Assam such as Shillong, Nowgong, Gauhati and Tura, looms were also made and supplied.\(^{22}\)

The department of weaving gained great prominence with time. This led to the production of some piece cloth, sheets, towels and other articles in diamond point, twill and double twill along with silk work which were carried out on demand to specific orders. Hand-sewing was also taught and two seniors and one junior took the Lady Earl Needlework

\(^{21}\)Rev S A D Boggs, Report from Jorhat Field, Missionary Conference Tenth Biennial Session, Gauhati, January 7-10, 1910
\(^{22}\)Sangma, History Vol II, 73-75.
examination. Girls were given lessons in cutting garments as well as sewing them.\textsuperscript{23} By the 1930s, the school incorporated a wide range of courses that trained students from the Bible school, the high school and the Normal schools (the school to impart teacher’s training) in agriculture, carpentry, gardening, cane work, black-smithy and tailoring.

The third constituent school of the Jorhat Christian Schools was the Jorhat Bible School, predominantly for women, this catered to the missionary training of natives along with other vocational training already mentioned above. This school opened to the locals an arena of learning which though religious in nature concurrently also gave them completely new sets of ideas to discuss and comprehend.

The Jorhat Christian Schools became a very significant conduit in the process of the urbanization of Jorhat town. The establishment of these finely constructed buildings added to the substance and streetscape of the town and contributed its architectural evolution. However, more significant were the ideas that came out of these urban establishments. The training that the residents of Jorhat and of other towns, who came to pursue various courses, underwent helped integrate them into the modern urban public sphere.

The industrial school trained its students in professional vocational courses and also gave them the means to earn new sorts of livelihoods. With the emergence of Gandhi in the forefront of Indian struggle for independence and his concepts of Swaraj and Satyagraha which included constructive work for the youth such as spinning and vocational education, the activities of missionaries, although never directly linked to the freedom struggle, played a crucial role in refining professional skills in Assam. The missionaries may not have intended to contribute to the national struggle and the incorporation of vocational training in their curriculum was been coincidental. But these vocational training courses did equip Assamese.

students with alternative means to earn livelihoods outside of agriculture at a time when the Congress had made the idea of constructive work became central to the nationalist agenda.

Similarly, the industrial school and the Bible school also played a very vital role in the social regeneration of the town by initiating programmes that brought women out of their households and provided them a platform that allowed them to take up courses which prepared them for urban life and fostered in them a modern urban consciousness. The notion of women as the ideal wife, homemaker and most importantly the quintessence of tradition and domesticity was slowly altered, not by design but in effect. The Bible school at Jorhat trained women in essential skills such as needlework, knitting, weaving and tailoring. The association of the school with the Teachers’ Training Schools at Nowgong allowed many of their students to visit the latter and undergo the teachers’ training programme.

Conclusion

The narrative of urbanization in Jorhat, thus, continued with the contribution of the American Baptist Missionaries, through their activities in the field of education, literature and medicine. The work of missionaries not only led to the infrastructural and architectural development of the town of Jorhat through the establishment of the Jorhat Christian Schools, the Jorhat Mission hospital and the Leper Colony but it also led to the regeneration and emergence of a modern urban public sphere. The schools spearheaded this process by catering to the natives who could not make it to Calcutta or Gauhati through modern education while the Technical School taught local students’ alternative urban livelihoods. In tandem with the colonial state and local tea planters, the American Baptist mission helped bring into being a urban public sphere animated by a modern consciousness about belonging and identity.
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