

# The Evolution of Primary Education in Assam Historically Before Indian Independence

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## **Abstract:**

The present paper explores the Evolution of Primary Education in Assam Historically Before Indian Independence. Fundamental education is essential to the entire educational system. This is when the child's official schooling starts. It serves as the framework for the educational system. The broad adoption of literacy can be attributed to this period of education. Widespread literacy is necessary for modernisation, social structure, economic growth, and the smooth operation of democratic institutions. Thus, improving average worker capability and increasing national efficiency should place a high premium on primary education. The purpose of this essay is to chart the evolution of basic education in Assam before the state gained independence. Its goal is to understand how primary education in Assam has changed since before independence. According to the Indian Constitution, free and compulsory education is available to all children up to the age of 14. It additionally facilitates our realisation of the many actions implemented periodically to implement the command of Article 45 of our constitution.

**Keywords:** Evolution, Primary Education, Assam, Historical, Indian Independence.

## **Introduction:**

The origins of the Rig Vedic era, when India was dominated by the Hindu educational system, can be linked to the evolution of basic education. Prior to society's need for education, the value of education was not appreciated. The village did not have a formal education system, yet it was not

entirely lacking either. An unofficial educational system was in place that was based on life lessons learnt from parents and passed down to future generations.

An analysis of the historical development of elementary education in India is very uninspiring. The indigenous primary education system that was widely used by the populace existed before the British educational system was introduced. Sources of information on the topic include the studies conducted in the Madras Presidency in 1822 by Sir Thomas Munroe, the Bombay Presidency in 1823 by Mount Stuart Elphinstone, and the Bengal Presidency in 1835 by William Adam. Their papers provide insight into the state of primary education for indigenous people in the nation before British colonisation.

Regarding Assam, it should be noted that the East India Company received His Majesty, the King of Ava, among other concessions at the Treaty of Yandaboo, signed on February 24, 1826, including dominion over Assam, Cachar, and Manipur. Agent to the Governor-General, David Scott, North-East Frontier, continued to grant lands to organisations such as the previous Government, while maintaining the integrity of the indigenous system. He provided more funding for the founding of multiple indigenous schools in Upper and Lower Assam in the beginning of 1826, with the Bengali government's consent.

Eleven schools were consequently founded in September 1826 in each of the following stations: Dharampore, Patte Darrang, Hajo, Bijali, Silah, Bishwanath, and Nilachal. The addition of schools at Gauhati, Behnaje, Dharampore, Patte Darrang, and Boreegoge brought the total number of schools to sixteen in a few of months. Adam White opened the Gauhati Elementary School in 1831. The official perspective held that traditional education had nothing to do with training in the new administration's art form. As a result, students greatly valued the instruction provided in this school, especially in Elementary English and science.

### **Statement of the Research Problem:**

Before independence, primary education in Assam had not advanced to the anticipated level. In 1930, the Assam Primary Education Act of 1926 underwent revision in response to its meagre success.

William Adam's plan for free and mandatory basic education in India during the British Raj was challenged by the General Committee of Public Instruction (GCPI). The idea of transferring education from the top and middle classes to the general public was rejected by many who considered the proposal to be both costly and unworkable. Native educational establishments in Assam included Pathsals for Hindus, Tols for Brahmins and high class Hindus, Muktabs for Muslims, and Sattras for Vaishnavas. During this time, Assam's basic education did not advance very quickly. This poor growth was caused by the government's incorrect grant-in-aid policy, the ineffectiveness of local boards in overseeing basic education, and the general lack of interest on the part of the populace. Preschool education frequently receives little funding, which leaves it with few resources and shoddy facilities. This may have an effect on the standard of instruction and the capacity of educators to give young students engaging educational experiences. Research benefits greatly from an examination of the historical development of primary education in Assam prior to Indian independence.

### **Related Works:**

1. Dr. Md. Aynul Hoque (2018), in his paper title "Progress of Elementary Education in Assam since Independence" emphasises The Assam government implemented the Assam Compulsory Primary Education Act in 1947, introducing Free and Compulsory Primary Education for all students aged 6 to 11, in an effort to reform the state's educational system following

independence. The Basic Education Model put forth by M. K. Gandhi was adopted in 1954 when the Assam Basic Education Act was established.

2. Poli Konwar (2017), in her paper titled "A District Level Study on Primary Education in Assam" highlights the view that primary education is a basic requirement for the development of states such as Assam. Additionally, it helps the economy's human resource development process. For a very long time, Assam has been known for its rigorous educational system. Throughout the middle Ages, the state had a native educational system.
3. Dr. Bidyanandana Borkakoty (2024), in the paper "Growth and Development of Primary Secondary and Higher Education in Assam Before Independence and Contributions of Christian Missionaries to The Field of Education in Assam" emphasises that the learnt Brahmins were helped and supported in their studies by the ancient Kamarupa monarchs. Notable writings in Kamarupa include the Yoginitantra, Habgaudhi Sambad, Kalika Puvan, and others. Buddhism's Minnath of Kamarupa recited the tantric works Kauljnana Ninam, Akul Vivatantra, and Kamakhyab Guhyahiddhi. The sage Palakashyapa of Kamarupa wrote the Hasta Ayurveda. Numerous volumes on astrology, medicine, postal proverbs, horse diagnostics, numerous songs, proverbs, etc. were written in ancient Kamrup, Assam.
4. Mohd. Mahib ur Rahman (20012), in his paper title "Educational Policies in Assam" demonstrates how the establishment of British authority in Assam area in 1826 marked the beginning of the development of modern education in the state. Traditionally, Assam used its own system of formal intuitions to teach primary education: Pathsalas for Hindus, Tols for Brahmins and high class Hindus, Madrassas for Muslims, and Sattras for Vaisnavites.

### **Objectives of the Study:**

The main objectives of the study are-

1. To study the development of primary education in Assam.
2. To discuss Assam's elementary education system historically prior to Indian independence.

### **Research Questions:**

1. Is there any evolution of Primary Education in Assam?
2. Did primary education in Assam have any significance prior to Indian Independence?

### **Research Methodology:**

The research work used the historical and descriptive technique and is based on secondary sources. Research papers, research articles, edited books, historical documents, periodicals, journals, websites, and the internet are all sources of secondary information that are gathered.

### **Discussion and Results:**

**According to Adam's Report from 1835**, non-official missionary William Adam was given the responsibility of conducting an assessment of the state of indigenous basic education at the time William Bentinck was the Governor General of Bengal. at accordance with his account, native youngsters received their elementary education at indigenous elementary schools. Native residents in the area themselves organized and provided support for them. Despite the fact that, as can be noted, "Back then, the term'school' was used to refer to a location where education was provided and included locations where the democratic school system was in place." Every village seems to have a school, it seemed.

As for Assam, in 1837, the Collector of Kamrup, Lieutenant Bogle, stressed the value of teaching the local language to students. He argued for the adoption of vernacular education, which would

make it easier for the general public to access a wide range of helpful knowledge. The thirst for English education, he said, would serve as the appropriate conduit for all higher fields of knowledge. As a result, in 1837, the Supreme Government approved the use of sixty-four rupees to create vernacular schools in Darrang, Chatgaree, and Tezpur.

William Adam, Mounstuart Elphinstone, Thomas Munro, and other educationists backed Matthie's proposal. A class of people familiar with science and English literature will progressively emerge at Gauhati, according to the General Committee of Public Instruction, following the formation of a well-run institution.

The government approved Matthie's concept for village schools as a "experimental measure" on the strong suggestion of Mr. Ross, the President in Council at the time, with the caveat that its continuation would depend on the outcomes of future school exams. Unfortunately, the plan to build Anglo-Vernacular schools was abandoned because it was felt that government educational resources should be focused on improving Gauhati educational instead of creating a large number of lower-grade schools. In the region of Kamrup, the Commissioner thereupon founded twenty-one local schools in August 1838. Two further schools in Luckimpore, three in Darrand, and four in Nowgong were sanctioned by the government due to the increasing need for these kinds of establishments.

**The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Indigenous schools can be roughly categorised into three groups. They were**

- (a) Education Institutions;
- (b) Primary Schools;
- (c) Family or Private Institutions

#### **Nature, Qualities, and Purposes:**

##### **(a) Educational Institutions:**

This group of educational establishments comprised the Hindu Pathsalas and the Muslim Maqtabas and Madrassas. The majority of these schools were located in mosques and temples, respectively. The local authorities, who were wealthy and devout individuals, provided financial support for the schools. The royal government refrained from meddling in these schools' internal issues. The pay for the teachers was meagre. These schools' primary goal was to produce Pundits and Maulabies for the community who would subsequently engage in intellectual pursuits.

##### **(b) Primary Schools:**

The purpose of these educational institutions was to meet the socioeconomic needs of the general public. They used to flee with the money that was raised. They used to be held in the landlord's varenda and occasionally under the trees' shade when the school lacked a permanent structure. Students used to be admitted to school at any time, and there was no set academic session. These kinds of schools were the birthplace of the well-known Monitorial system.

##### **(c) Family or Private Institutions:**

The high-class members of the community were the only ones who could attend the third type of indigenous schools. They consist of the business, the landlords, and the royal administrative family. Making their sons and daughters the rightful heirs to the family's customs and culture was the main goal.

## **Types of Indigenous Schools:**

To meet the demands of the rural population, several indigenous types of educational institutions still exist today. A summary of their characteristics, actions, and roles can be seen below.

### **(1) Gurukula System:**

The Gurukula system is a type of Vedic education where students receive their education in the home of the guru. In his familial setting, the instructor, or guru, oversaw, coordinated, and managed all aspects of education; this system is known as "Gurukula" in its entirety. At the time, it was believed that pupils could not succeed in their studies while experiencing strong feelings of love and affection in their families. It can be enjoyed in the tranquil setting of the Guru's "Asrama" away from home. At the age of twelve, the pupil was to join the "Guru Griha" following the conclusion of their elementary education. The Vedic sutras and hero narratives were taught to students by the Gurus throughout the Rig Vedic era. The poets of the era wrote the sutras that make up the Rig Veda.

### **(2) Monastery System:**

The Buddhist educational system known as Monastery, Sangha, or Bihara existed in parallel to the Gurukula system in Vedic education. Its organisational and managerial style was essentially dissimilar from Gurukula's. The centres of social, religious, and educational organisations run by the populace to advance Buddhist culture were known as Buddhist monasteries. The main goal of this instruction was to achieve "Nirvana," or freedom from the pains and afflictions of this world. Everlasting mental and spiritual tranquility was the goal of education.

### **(3) Monitorial System:**

The practice of instructing the younger students in the absence of the teacher was part of the Vedic and Muslim indigenous educational systems. Later on, the name Monitorial system was used.

### **(4) Pathshalas:**

The Pathshalas are well-known Hindu indigenous educational establishments. The children of the ordinary people were able to fulfil their educational needs, both social and personal, here. Education was primarily meant to prepare students for simple life and high thinking.

### **(5) Sattras:**

During the 16th century, a socio-cultural revolution was started throughout the entirety of Assam under the direction of Madhabdev and Srimanta Sankardeb. Previously, the Sattras served as the epicentres of this revolution. The socio-cultural centres of instruction founded in religious and spiritual sensibility are known as Sattras. A Sattra's "Satradhikar," or leader, is responsible for maintaining and overseeing it. He used to receive religious submission from the common people. He provides them with the guidance and direction they need to live their disciplined, moral, and spiritual lives. Even now, those who submit to the Satradhikar for guidance on leading a perfect life are eligible to get an education in the Sattras. According to reliable sources, there are currently 846 government-registered Sattras in Assam who are dedicated to promoting culture and education in the region. Even outside the state, Koch Behar is home to the well-known Madhupur Sattra.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Ahom Kings gave territory for the Sattras to be established in order to advance Vaishnava culture and religion. By taking this action, the royal authority had unintentionally assumed the lead in promoting culture, religion, and education among the general populace. Sanskrit Tols were created in the Sattras to promote higher learning as well. The Satradhikar used to provide education and guidance to the religious followers so they might lead

the perfect Vaishnava life. Under the "guru," they were taught moral principles such as obedience, tolerance, dignity, sincerity, simplicity, and others.

The Sattras continue to serve as training centres for traditional dances and devotional melodies known as "Satriya Nrityageet." Training in painting, dramatisation, instrumental music, and art is offered. Throughout the decades, they have continued to uphold the cultural legacy of the revered Vaishnava saints. The Sattras are creating a common platform of religion and culture among the people of Assam.

#### **(6) Naamghar:**

The word "Naamghar" literally translates to "house of prayer." In the rural and inner regions of Assam, Naamghars have persistently functioned as the hub for education, culture, and religion. It has been deemed essential for every rural community to establish a Naamghar. It meets the people's of Assam needs in terms of their cultural and spiritual dreams and aspirations. The Naamghar upholds the Vaishnava way of life's tenets as a branch of Sattras. Through the Naamghar, the general concept of "Namdharma," or "religion of prayer," as articulated by Sankardeva has been practically worked out at the grassroots level.

In addition to its religious purpose, Naamghar has succeeded in fostering a sense of cultural awareness and communal consciousness among the Assamese people. It serves as a place for adult or social education that is run and arranged by the individuals who use it. The famous epics "Kirtan" and "Bhagawat" are constantly recited, discussed, and interpreted for the benefit of the illiterate men and women. The ancient epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata serve as the inspiration for the "Bhaona" system of dramatic presentation, which is housed in Naamghar's premises. The people of Naamghar used to commemorate a variety of rituals, feasts, and festivals with a great deal of solemnity. For those living in the state's most rural regions, it serves as the Assamese society's Community Development Centre. In actuality, Naamghar was created by Sankardeva as a community development centre or social education centre for the people in the sixteenth century in Assam.

#### **(7) Than:**

Through the Neo-Vaishnavite reformist movement of Sankardeva, religious institutions known as "Than" or "Thana" were established throughout Assam. Then emphasises the reforms in religion, society, economy, and culture. In the sixteenth century, these Thans developed as hubs for social, theological, and cultural reforms.

#### **(8) Maqtab:**

Maqtab is the name of the Muslim system of indigenous basic education. The Muslim community was obligated by religion to send their kids to the Maqtab for education. The primary goal of its curriculum was to impart basic writing and reading skills. The Arabic word "qatab," which meaning "place where training is given for writing," is where the name "Maqtab" originates.

#### **Early Missionaries' Contributions to Education in Assam:**

The Christian missionaries are primarily motivated by a proselytising mentality wherever they go in India. That being said, their contribution was distinct. Indian traders began to get visits from European trading companies during the Mughal Empire. They arrived at the start of the seventeenth century, the Portuguese. Their trade and commerce had gradually expanded, giving them the freedom to occupy more of this nation. In this regard, the British and Portuguese achieved greater success.

They started establishing what were known as "Charity Schools," which were elementary institutions. Assam refers to the Assam of the 19th century, which comprised Meghalaya,



Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram, rather than the Assam of today. Francis Jenkins arrived in Guwahati in April 1834, serving as the Governor-General's Commissioner and Agent for Assam and the Northeast. He welcomed the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society of Calcutta in the early months of 1835 in an attempt to appease the border tribes, especially the Singphos and the Khamtis.

Taking the issue seriously, the Baptist Society sent a mission led by Reverends Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter, along with a printing press that arrived in Sadiya in March 1836. When Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter opened a school in Sadiya on January 6, 1837, twenty students joined in just one week, demonstrating an incredible level of excitement. With an average student attendance of 347, the American Baptist Missionaries established three schools in Nowgong, five in Kamrup, and fourteen in Sibsagar by 1845. The Welsh Missionaries started roughly twelve schools in Khasi-Jaintia Hills.

### **Primary Education in Assam during the British Era:**

On February 24, 1826, the Treaty of Yandaboo placed Assam under the jurisdiction of the East India Company. The priesthood castes, who also held significant sway over the general populace, continued to run the educational establishments that withstood the destructive forces of Burma. Assam was in a terrible position at the time due to the weak Ahom authority, the plunder and destruction caused by the Burmese, and the poor performance of its educational institutions. With the Government of India's assent, David Scott, the Agent to the Governor General, North East Frontier, founded eleven elementary schools through land assignment, the majority of which was in Lower Assam.

Francis Jenkins arrived in April 1834 to serve as the Governor-General's Commissioner and Agent for Assam and the northeast of Rangpur. The General Committee of Public Instruction approved the creation of an English school at Gauhati in June 1835 as a consequence of the request to the government. In 1942, Mr. D. S'ouza became the Headmaster of a second English school established in Sibsagar for the boys of the Ahom royal line.

The educated segment of the population expressed their desire to see their boys go to school, and many of them ended up becoming educators. Numerous branch schools opened as a result of the growing demand for English education. These schools were built totally with public funds and are located in the Gauhati neighbourhood in Pandu, Kamakhya, Beltola, Amingaon, and North Gauhati.

Upper Assam saw the establishment of schools by missionaries, particularly Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter, starting in 1837. The need of women's education was highlighted in Wood's Despatch of 1854, and as a result, Sibsagar's first government elementary school for girls opened its doors in 1860–1861. In the ensuing two years, comparable schools were established in Nowgong and Gauhati. In addition, Wood's Despatch established a number of primary, middle, and high schools.

Assam was separated from Bengal in 1874 and established as a distinct province, headed by a Chief Commissioner who reported directly to the Governor-General-in-Council. R. H. Keatinge was the first Chief Commissioner of Assam. The state of the schools started to get better the same year that Assam established a Department of Education. There are twelve sub-inspectors, nine deputy inspectors, and the position of director of public schools under the Department of Education.

The Indian Education Commission's recommendations from 1882 stated that local organisations were tasked with overseeing and expanding primary education. The Local Boards and Municipalities in Assam were also tasked with overseeing primary education.

Many primary schools were founded throughout the nation's provinces as a result of the Gokhale Bill of 1911 and the Government's Educational Policy of 1913. During this period, the number of primary schools in Assam also significantly grew.

In Assam, the Primary Education Act was enacted in 1926. It was prepared by adding a number of helpful clauses. Regretfully, however, this Act's provisions were not implemented in Assam.

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