

Educational Contribution of the Catholic Church in the Karbi Anglong District of Assam: A Study among the College-Going Students of the District

¹Johnson Parackal

Research Scholar, Department of History, Assam University, Silchar, Assam, India

²Dr Paul B. Chonzik

HoD, Department of History, Assam University, Silchar, India

ABSTRACT:

The arrival of Catholic missionaries to Northeast India and the establishment of many educational institutions coupled with their selfless service to the people of this place especially in the field of education brought about a tremendous change in the growth and progress of this region. Northeast Region which was considered backward in all sphere of life had the advantage of the catholic missionaries who were quick to understand the urgent need of education and set up several primary schools to begin their mission of education and societal transformation of the region. This article studies the educational contribution of the Catholic Church in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam, where the majority population belongs to the Karbi tribe. A survey conducted among the college-going youths of this district, using Google Form, clearly shed light on the educational contribution of the Catholic Church in the district. This study, however, is meant to be an eye-opener for those who are involved in decision-making and those framing the educational policies and prospects for future generations of youths of this region and to improve the quality of their lives. At the same time, it is also an attempt to understand better the significant contribution made by the Catholic Church, especially in the field of education to the people of this region.

The Key Words: Assam, Karbi Anglong District, Karbi, Catholic Church, Educational Contribution

1. Introduction

The introduction of education in the Northeast by the Church can be considered as a historical accident at a time when drastic changes were taking place in the region. The education offered by the Church served as a backbone to the tribal people especially those living in the rural areas of the society bringing them the light of knowledge and information. The missionaries had to undergo tough times and face many challenges, limitations and difficulties but determined as they were, they held on to their mission of imparting education to the young. Their investment in terms of personnel and resources were maximum in the field of education. The efforts of the Church have borne fruit today as the educational standard of the region is considerably high compared to other parts of the country. Where missionary influence has been the greatest, literacy rates are far above the national average. Unfortunately, this is an area where very little research has been conducted and very little recognition has been given to the Church. As this topic interests me very much, I wish to attempt to understand

better the contribution of the church in the field of education and how it has brought about great transformation to the people of this region.

2. Assam: Geographical Features

Assam was known as Pragjyotishpura in the ancient days. However, in the First Millenium, it came to be called Kamarupa. The disintegration of Kamarupa which took place in the 12th century, led to the founding of the Ahom kingdom in the 13th century by a Shan prince called Sukhapa, who unified the polity that lasted for the next 600 years. [1]

As regards the etymology of Assam there isn't any clear and precise understanding but the academicians are of the opinion that the name is associated with the Ahom Kingdom which was deeply rooted in Buddhist tradition and thought. The name Assam said to be derived from a word in the now extinct Ahom language called 'asama' which means 'peerless'. [1]

Thus the name Assam came to be used by the British after 1838 and the same continued to be used to mean the largest Indian state in the region by the Government of India after 1947. However, the Government of Assam initiated a process to change the name of Assam into 'Asom' which means 'uneven' on 27 February 2006, thus bringing down the curtain to the 180-year-old name 'Assam'. [2]

Assam occupies a critically important place both strategically and geographically. Being located in the North-eastern part of the country, it borders on the north with the kingdom of Bhutan and the state of Arunachal Pradesh. The states of Nagaland and Manipur surround it in the east and to the south by the states of Mizoram and Tripura. Assam, internationally borders with Bangladesh in the west and also with the Indian states of Meghalaya and West Bengal. The states like Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya which were once part of Assam had its capital at Shillong is now in the Meghalaya state. Assam's capital was shifted to Dispur, in 1972. Assam occupies a total area of 78,438 sq. km and a population of more than 31,169,272. [3]

3. Karbi Anglong District

Karbi Anglong was originally known as Mikir Hills District Council, when it was formally set up as per the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution on 23 June 1953. Being combined with North Cachar Hills, the new district was called United Mikir and North Cachar Hill District and officially came to exist on 17 November 1951. The newly carved out district covered an area of 15,237 sq which was taken from Mikir Hills Tract and its contiguous portions from districts like Nowgong, Sibsagar, United Khasi - Jaintia Hills and North Cachar Hills. Later on, the newly created district was divided into two sub-divisions, namely North-Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills. These two sub-divisions were made into two separate full-fledged districts on 2 February 1970. The Mikir Hills District having its own independent administrative unit came to be called Karbi Anglong district. The present district has its borders along with Nowgong and Golaghat districts on the north and north-east, Nagaland and North Cachar on the south and Jaintia Hills on the west. The new district has a total area of 10,332 sq. km. [4]

4. Catholic Church in Assam and Early Contacts with the Karbis

Assam witnessed the arrival of the first Catholic missionaries in the year 1890. The first group of German Salvatorian missionaries came to Guwahati under the leadership of Otto Hopfenmueller and Marianus Schumm in February 1890. Their arrival marked the foundation of the Catholic mission in the whole of the Northeast. Formation

of the faithful being one of the fundamental priorities of the missionaries, they were quick to open up schools to provide instruction and faith formation to the young. Thus, the first Catholic school was set up in Shillong in 1891. Soon enough, a trail of schools was opened up in different places despite a lack of financial support from local or national governments. The mission had to have a considerable outlay in building up these schools [5].

The mission activities of the German Salvatorian fathers received a tremendous boost with the creation of the Prefecture Apostolic of Assam in 1889 with its headquarters at Shillong and entrusting the same to the Salvatorians. However, the outbreak of World War 1 in 1915 brought an abrupt end to the activities and services of the Salvatorians as they were forced to leave the country. For a brief while, the mission was entrusted to the Jesuits of Calcutta to look after till the arrival of the Salesians [6].

Salesians of Don Bosco landed in the Indian subcontinent on 14 January 1906 at Tanjavur in South India. But it was only in the year 1922 that they reached Northeast India, under the leadership of Louis Mathias who led the second missionary expedition to India from Turin, Italy consisting of eleven Salesians. The Assam Missions were already entrusted to the Salesians of Don Bosco by then. At his arrival, Louis Mathias took over the reins of Assam prefecture at Shillong. The arrival of the Salesians in Assam in 1922 marked a turning point in the history of the Church in Northeast India. Picking up from where the Salvatorians had left behind, Salesians started in earnestness their mission of reaching out to the people of this vast region with education, catechesis, formal and non-formal education, health and youth services etc. They started setting up schools, colleges, technical centres, non-formal educational institutes, skills training centres in almost every nook and corner of the region, providing quality education and technical skills training to the youth. Much of the progress and development that the region witnesses today is because of the hard work and dedication of the Christian missionaries. [6]

There were no direct missionary contacts with the Karbis or Mikirs as they were called earlier till about 1950. It was the Mikirs who came down to the plains who first got in touch with the missionaries and were converted to Christianity. These contacts, later on, lead to the establishment of many institutions by the missionaries in different parts of Karbi Anglong. The hard work and dedication of the missionaries brought about great changes to the people of Karbi Anglong in the latter years.

5. Education in the Karbi Society during the British Period

As per the available records, the entire Karbi land was out of the orbit of formal education for long many years and

illiteracy was perhaps the order of the day. The British made practically no attempt to provide education to the Karbis as Karbi Land was inaccessible and the terrain was extremely unhealthy, unhygienic with frequent occurrences of epidemics. The British showed no interest in anything except the regular revenue collection from the respective Mouzas. For this, they appointed Mouzadars who regularly carried out their duty of revenue collection faithfully.

It is believed that the British took the least interest in areas where they expected the least trouble or resistance from people. For the same reason, British involvement and participation in those areas were highly restricted or limited. Added to it was also the peaceful nature of the Karbis which put them in a very disadvantaged position compared to the Mizos and the Nagas who were more aggressive and demanding and therefore managed to get substantial support from the administration as well as the missionaries.

6. Catholic Church and Its Educational Services in Karbi Anglong

Mikir Hills remained out of the purview of the Catholic missionaries and isolated for quite a long time and could not make much headway into it except for the indirect contacts that they maintained with a few karbis who frequented their mission centres situated on the borders of Khasi hills, in Meghalaya and Assam. The Salvatorian missionaries who had a brief stint in the region could hardly do anything for the karbis. The missionaries were able to make a dent finally in Karbi Anglong when a certain Langtuk Hanse from the village of Marjong, just a few kilometres away from the present parish centre at Umswai, was the first to hear the Gospel message and decided to become a catholic. On 25 January 1914, he led a group of six people from Marjong to Umtyrkhang, in the Khasi Hills and received baptism at the hands of Fr. Christopher Becker. These six became the bearers of the Good News to others in the village, and on 4 May 1916, 31 others from the village received baptism from the hands of the Catechist, Stephen Manik, and on 15th of the same month another 22 received baptism from Fr. Gringnat, SJ. In 1920 some of these who received the faith went to settle down in Umpanai and thus the community was started there too. Later on, a Church was built in Mynser to look after the spiritual needs of the Catholics. The work in this region was not restricted only to the Karbis as the Tiwas also responded to the faith. In 1950, the people of Bor Marjong and Umswai received the faith and they, in turn, became the agents of evangelization [5].

Although catholic faith had found acceptance with the Karbis and the first baptisms were already there in the year 1914, the establishment of a catholic centre in Karbi Anglong became a reality only in 1967 at Sojong. This is because the church had to face many difficulties and challenges even when it was experiencing a steady increase

in the number of its followers. On 11 February 1967 Fr. John Marie became the first Parish Priest of the Sojong. In 1971, the mission centre at Diphu was opened and in 1972, the Parish of Dokmoka and 1974, the Chokihola mission was opened. The parish at Umswai was opened only in 1977 even though they were one of the first ones to receive the catholic faith.

7. Review of Literature

One of the leading service-providers in the field of education in the world is the Catholic Church. This is true of India too. Knowing very well the significance of education, the Church makes every possible effort to take their educational services to every nook and corner of the world. Because the church believes that the overall growth and development of a society depends largely on the educational status of its people [7].

The fundamental aim of education is to teach the students to live with dignity, to understand the deeper meaning of life and transcendence, to learn to relate well with others, to love creation, think freely and critically, find fulfilment and satisfaction in work, plan their future, and simply learn 'to be'. This is possible only in and through education. one can hope for a more humane and harmonious society only through education [8].

The very nature of education is that it helps a person to be open to other cultures, without losing one's own identity. This is more than true in the context of the north-eastern region too. The experience of young people in an educational institution, the acquiring of both theoretical and practical knowledge about others and themselves, the acceptance of the other person and their cultures can all help to form true values in the young that last forever. In this way, instead of the differences leading to conflicts, those very same differences are made to become opportunities for mutual enrichment, leading to harmony [8].

The understanding and thinking of the church is in perfect line with that of the educational policy of the government of India, which clearly states the same ideals of education, that of human sensitivities that leads to national unity, freedom of mind and spirit which will further the goals of socialism, secularism and democracy enshrined in our constitution [9]. Catholic church has its educational focus very clear on goals such as making students think independently and critically for themselves and to apply knowledge to solve human problems, and to become agents of social change in one's situation through unselfish, courageous action on behalf of the poor and the oppressed [7].

Ever since the church started its pioneering works among the tribes of Northeast India through its educational institutions, it has been contributing to its overall growth, through its pedagogical mission and promotion of cultural traditions. It is not at all a new phenomenon in the church

to pay great attention to the intercultural aspect of life of a place where it operates, especially in catholic educational institutions. For the same reason, the church makes no difference between one and the other when it comes to ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is this very distinguishing characteristic mark of accepting and welcoming everyone who comes into its portal that makes the church a very special and unique institution [7].

The Church in its declaration on Christian Education [Gravissimum Educationis] clearly says that no less than other schools does the Catholic Schools pursue cultural goals and human formation of youth with the intention of making the whole of human culture opens to the good news of salvation so that every aspect of one's life is illumined by faith". [10]

The Catholic Church is deeply aware of the integration of faith and culture even as it helps pupils to achieve the value of knowledge through the medium of its teaching. And therefore, it does not dilute or compromise under any circumstances its rightful objective of imparting knowledge. [11]

8. Objectives

- To examine the educational contribution of the Catholic Church in the Karbi Anglong District of Assam.
- To evaluate the understanding and attitude of the college-going youths of the Karbi Anglong district of Assam on the educational facilities and opportunities offered to them by the Catholic Educational Institutions.
- To assess the contribution of the Catholic Educational Institutions in improving the educational standards of Karbi Anglong district.

9. Research Questions

- What are the educational facilities offered to the youth of today by the Catholic Church in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam?
- Are the educational facilities offered to the youth of today by the Catholic Church in the Karbi Anglong district of Assam satisfactory?

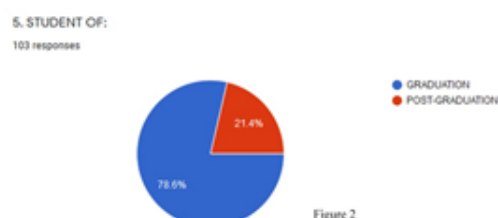


Fig.3 shows that among those participated in the survey 97.1% are still students pursuing their educational pursuits in catholic educational institutions. The remaining small % was not so sure if they were studying in a catholic institute.

c. How has the educational contribution of the Catholic Church helped in the overall development of Karbi Anglong district of Assam?

10. Methodology

The methodology intended to use for this research work is the "Descriptive Research Method". The data collection will be organised through a set of a questionnaire containing fifteen questions will be administered to the respondents through Google Forms and the responses will be gathered and analysed. The approach of this study, therefore, will be one of the quantitative approaches. From an analysis of the responses collected, we can get a clear picture of the contribution of the Catholic Church towards the educational advancement of the district. As a sizeable number of college-going students now were once upon time products of catholic educational institutions, the study will look at the opinion and attitude of these young people who are now enrolled in graduate and post-graduate studies will be able to give their opinions on the educational contribution made by the catholic missionaries in the district and their experiences of education in such environment.

11. Catholic Educational Contribution - An Evaluation

The following are the analysis of the survey conducted among college-going students of Karbi Anglong district to assess the contribution of the catholic institutions towards the educational advancement of the district. This survey was carried out through Google forms. A total of 103 youths participated in the survey and given their responses. Their findings are given below.

Fig.1 indicates the area of the survey. Out of the total number of responses received, 30.1% is from East Karbi Anglong region, while the rest 69.9 % is from West Karbi Anglong region of the district.

Fig.2 indicates the academic status of the respondents. Among the total respondents, 78 % belonged to the graduate level and the rest 21.4 % belonged to the post graduate category.

6. Are you undergoing your studies in a catholic college at present?
103 responses

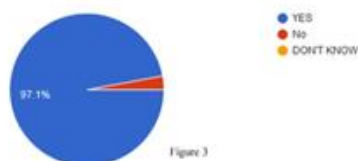


Figure 3

8. Are you happy with the educational facilities offered to young people by the catholic church in Karbi Anglong District?
103 responses

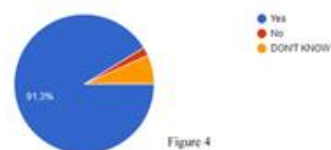


Figure 4

Fig.4. To a question whether young people are happy with the educational facilities offered to them by the Catholic Church, 91.3% of the respondents said that they were happy, while a small % said no and the others were not sure of themselves.

10. Do you think that the church run institutions in your district provide adequate educational facilities to present day youth?
103 responses

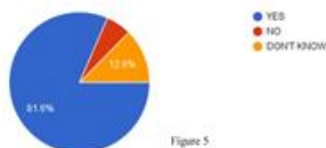


Figure 5

Fig.5 displays what the young people feel about church run institutions and if they provided adequate facilities to them. Of the total 103 responded, 81.6% said yes, 12.6% said that they don't know and the rest said no.

In Fig.7 the respondents have clearly stated their view to a question if the church has provided modern facilities like

15. According to you, do the church provide modern facilities like library, computer lab, internet, wifi, indoor-outdoor games to the youth of today?
103 responses

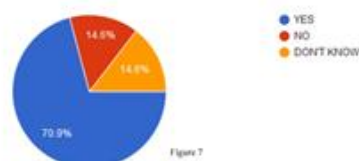


Figure 7

library, computer lab, internet, WiFi, and outdoor games. Of the total number responded, 70.9% said, yes; while 14.6% have clearly stated 'no' and another 14.6% were unsure of the actual reality.

13. Do you think that given a choice, will you be happy to study in a catholic institute than other institutions?
103 responses



Figure 8

Fig.8 indicates that 82.5% of the respondents were happy to study in a catholic institute if given a choice; while a 15.5% were not sure if they would continue in a catholic institute, if given a choice.

Fig.9 shows that 98.1% of the respondents were happy with the quality of teaching in catholic educational institutions.

11. Are you happy with the quality of teaching in catholic institutions?
103 responses

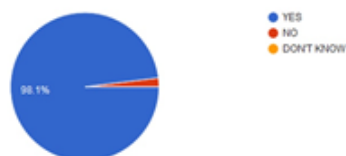


Fig.10 clearly indicates that 92.2% respondents believe that the catholic educational institutions help students to achieve their goals by preparing them well by offering them holistic education and setting them on the path of success and progress.

14. Do you think that the holistic education given by the catholic educational institutions help students to achieve their goals and set them on the path to progress?
103 responses

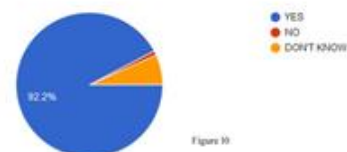


Figure 9

16. Do you think that the catholic schools/colleges have contributed to the growth of education in Karbi Anglong District?
103 responses

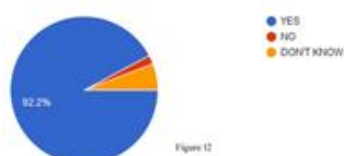


Figure 12

In Fig.12, 92.2% has opined that the catholic educational institutions have contributed to the growth of education in Karbi Anglong District.

12. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion we can say with all certainty that the efforts made by the Catholic Church for the promotion of education in the district of Karbi Anglong has been phenomenal. The missionaries were not only quick to understand the significance of education among the people of this region but considered it their top priority and responsibility to bring them the light of knowledge and education. So much so, the investment of the church has been tremendous in the district. Through personnel, institutions and infrastructural development and more especially through their quality and competent services, the church became an irrevocable institution known for its committed service of the poor and the deprived.

It is evidently clear from the survey what the young people feel about the unique role played by the church in their development. The large number of students flocking to educational institutions run by the missionaries even today is a clear proof of their relevance and what these institutions have done in the past. Had it not been the church run educational institutions, the story of this district would have been quite a different one altogether.

From the findings of the above survey, I would like to make some recommendations for future plan of action.

1. There is an acute need for good quality educational institutions in the district with excellent facilities and high quality services.
2. All teachers must be trained to provide professional services.
3. There must be infrastructural facilities for holistic development of the young through sports, games, and extra-curricular activities in the schools.
4. There must be a proportionate increase in the annual outlay of budget for development of educational institutions.
5. All educational policies must be directed toward integral development and holistic growth of the young people.

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