

Educational System In Pre-Colonial Assam Under The Ahoms With Special Reference To The Vocational Education

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ABSTRACT

Assam as a part of greater north-eastern India has had always maintained the educational legacy in one way or other. Formal and informal, both forms of education were practiced. Literary evidences show how the penetration of Aryan rituals and practices into this part of India helped in shaping artistic and literary activities. It actually started in the early period of the history of Assam which continued its journey in the medieval period finally reaching the colonial scene. Education brings about substantial changes in the socio-economic and cultural life of the people. One of the important objectives of education is to equip people with knowledge and skill. The kind of education imparted through the educational institutions and authorities during the medieval period was mainly vocational in nature, concerned with occupation, employment or in the present context, job creation. Apart from religious teachings people were also taught to be skilled and proficient in various public-private activities. The paik system of the Ahoms can be viewed from this lens.

Keywords: Education, Ahom, Paik, Vocational

Introduction: From ancient times Assam has played a glorious part in the promotion and spread of education and culture. This status is borne out by the mythological accounts numerous archaeological remains and a mass of literary evidences of ancient Assam. It was the emphasis laid on the development of moral and spiritual aspects of life that greatly shaped the type of education and the subjects for studies. The aim of education in medieval Assam was almost the same. Its primary object was the moral and spiritual development of the people.¹In these times, formal education was a privilege of a microscopic minority. Only the sons of the priestly class and royal and noble families had formal education. The vast commonality had only informal education transmitted to them orally in the form of folk lore or folk literature or through religious performances. The Vaishnavite movement laid more stress on the moral and spiritual development of the people and as subsidiary means for the attainment of that goal, it introduced among the people the culture of different branches of art such as singing dancing, playing of musical instruments, Painting etc. Although the majority of the people were quite the ignorant of reading and writing, most of them were conversant with the teachings of the epics, the Puranas and other religious books. Because in the temples to read these books and to explain the contents to them. The formal education imparted in Tols, Pathsalas or Chatrasalas were not widespread as to cover all sections of the population. It was mainly confined to the upper strata of society especially to the Brahmins, the Kayasthas and the Kalitas. There is no evidence on record that students belonging to other castes were debarred from admission to schools, but number of students coming from other castes was probably very much limited. Education appeared to have been the privilege of the male sex but the fair sex, though didn't attend schools, and was taught at home to read and write in the educated and well-to-do families. ² The responsibility of imparting education was mainly the concern of the Brahmanas in Medieval Assam. The guru-grihas, that is the houses of the Brahmin teachers, were the institutions where education was imparted. There were Brahmin scholars who maintained Tolas at different places patronized by the local people. From Biographical works we know that a movement of Tola or Chatra-salas existed in Assam, at the times of Sankardeva. Sankardeva

¹ S. Rajguru, The medieval Assamese society, p. 382-383

² S. N. Sarma, Socio- Economic & Cultural History of Assam, p. 159

himself was reading in such a Tola under Mahendra Kandali at Bardowa. From the Biographies it is learnt that the places such as Hajo, Vyaskuchi, Kochbehar, Ratnapur were the centres education in Medieval Assam. Residential students lived a simple and austere life performing daily religious duties and serving the teacher in assigned works. According to late P.C.Goswami, there were separate schools for teaching Kaitheli system of education manned by Kayasthas where arithmetic measurement and maintenance of account were taught.³ The tradition of importing education that related to arts and crafts were either transmitted as hereditary lines or acquired through the medium of professional guilds or Khels.⁴ They were no doubt professional artisans and in all stages the members of the Khels got education in particular craftsmanship though hereditary nature. The paiks or workers of the state didn't have the chance of taking any formal education and therefore their education was normally confined to their khels. Queen Pramathaswari popularly known as Phuleswari and her husband king Siva Simha were great patrons of learning and art. She not only patronized scholars in diffusing education and learning but also first established a pathsala at the capital where education was mainly imported in Sanskrit. King Rudra Singha is said to have established a number of schools at different places of his Kingdom and also patronized a number of students to study in important centres of learning outside Assam.

Discussion: The most significant aspect of the Tai-Ahom system of education is the great importance attached to the education in history. The knowledge of Buranjis was considered essential for the Ahom nobility. It was considered a sacred duty of every Ahom. The most significant aspect of the Tai-Ahom system of education is the great importance attached to the education in history. The knowledge of Buranjis was considered essential for the Ahom nobility. It was considered a sacred duty of every Ahom of the royal family and aristocracy to write and preserve Buranjis. Since it was not possible to learn history without the Knowledge of the language, the study of the language was also considered a sacred duty. There was the practice of reciting Buranjis during the Ahom marriage ceremonies.

In fact, in the early stages the Ahom Kings tried to make the Ahom as language of the court, culture and Buranjis, and initially the Buranjis and other court documents were written in Ahom. But the subjects could not understand the alien language. Therefore, the practice developed to write Buranjis both in Ahom and Assamese. In course of time when the rulers adopted Assamese, the practice was given up and Buranjis were written only in Assamese.⁵

The formal Tai Ahom education system was confined to a few. However there was the vast informal sector of peoples education in which the traditional skill in arts and crafts was handed over from generation to generation. Momai Tamuli Barbarua, during the reign of Pratap Singha re-organised the villages and set up separate classes of potters, black-smith, gold-smiths, silver-smiths etc. This made the knowledge in these arts hereditary. As N.K. Basu has said, "The Khel (guild) system with diverse Khels or Guilds of Paiks, e.g. Japisajiya, Jathipatiya, Dbenuchocha, Shilakuti, Khamikar, and so on, also made professional skill in different cottage industries hereditary amongst the members of the respective guilds and their successors. Chanrung Phukan was in-charge of architectural work, e.g. planning and making of temples, palaces, 'Maidams' (Burial vaults or Mounds), bridges, etc. Not book knowledge but knowledge through work and practice was mostly emphasized for artisans' efficiency and skill.⁶

In the Tai-Ahom system of education the formal education was limited to a select few; and in the Brahminical system also the formal education was limited in character. There was an informal sector of popular education ; and the principal informal agencies of education were namghars, bhawanas, dances, music, painting, art, architecture, sculpture, folk-literature, folk-music, folk-dances, vachanabalis of Dak Mahapurusa, proverbs, khel system, cottage industries etc, and the tradition continued unabated out-side the Tai-Ahom system. The one most important task for a high born Ahom Chamua was to go to war for the defence of the country. Proficiency in warfare was followed by royal recognition and rewards in the form of grants of lands and office. This royal practice served as a great incentive to the Ahom youth acquires proficiency in swordsmanship and handling of spears, and every home in absence of formal military academy became the training centre. It was compulsory for the young-men of the royal family to take military training. In fact, in the Ahom administrative system there was no branch that was purely civilian and non-military. All officers and 'paiks' were bound to go for war and therefore, they had to undergo a course of military training, and always remain prepared to fight, for the country.

There are references to royal navy of the Ahom Age in many inscriptions. The Apshad inscription refers to a naval engagement which took place between Sushthita Varman of Kamrup and the later Gupta king Mahasena Gupta. The Nidhanpur Grant also mentions a naval battle which was probably fought between Bhaskaravarman and Sasanka, king of Bengal. The Kamauli Grants record a glorious naval victory which Vaidyadeva won over his enemy of south Vanga, near the mouth of the Ganges. The naval power of Assam flourished under the Ahoms, who in several naval encounters brought utter disaster to the Mughal army. Shihabuddin gives a specific account of Assam's flotilla. There is no other difference between the two than this that the prow and stern of the Kosah have two horns while the head and base of the bachari comprise of only

³ S.N. Sarmah, op.cit. p. 159

⁴ S.N. Sarmah, op.cit. p.157

⁵ Gogol, L., Tai Sanskritir Ruprekha, Calcutta, 1985, p. 32.

⁶ Barbarua, H., Ahomar Din, Guwahati, 1981, pp. 474-76.

one leveled plank; and as aiming at strength they build these boats with the heart of the timber, they are slower than kosaha. So many are the boats, large and small in the country that on one occasion the news writer of Gauhati reported in the month of Ramzan that up to the date of his writing, 32,000 kachar and kesah had reached that place or passed it. Further he says that the people built most of their boats with the combat wood, and such vessels, however heavily they may be loaded, on being swamped do not sink in the water. Moreover this account Muhammadan historians have left to us extensive materials concerning to the naval power maintained by the Ahom and Koch kings in later time.⁷ The naval attainment of the Assamese achieved a high pitch of efficiency under the Ahom rulers. They possessed an efficient navy is borne out by the references of their naval encounters, particularly with the Muhammadan invaders. The naval fights that took place at Koliabar and Saraighat are really memorable. Although the Ahoms were defeated in the first encounter, they fought valiantly. But at Saraighat the Assamese warships routed the Mughal fleet. At the end of the battle even the great Ram Singha had to admit the valour and skill of his redoubtable opponents. "Every Assamese soldier is expert in rowing boats in shooting arrows in digging trenches and in wielding guns and cannon any other part of India have not seen."⁸

The Ahom Age is remarkable for its progress in medical science. There were many 'Bej' who were remunerated by the king by grant of land, attendants etc. These 'Bej' could treat patients in the royal palace as well as in the households of the subjects. Herbal medicines, chemicals Tantra-Mantras (charms and incantations) were used for treatment, and the training in the manufacture of drugs could be had only at the residence of the 'Bej' or 'Oja'. Those who were interested in medicine had to go to the 'Bej' for learning in medicine and had to pay high fees for the same. Initially the students had to learn how to identify and collect medicinal herbs from jungles and bushes. Then they were taught how to combine and prepare medicines. Finally the apprentices were given training of diagnosis of various diseases. The training continued for a long time during which the student had to read the medical treatises and obtain masters' over the subject. That medical science was well developed can be appreciated from the numerous medical treatises of the period still extant. Only very trustworthy Bejs were attached to the royal household. The Bej Barua was the royal physician.⁹

In medieval period there were huge number horses and elephants in army. These were indispensable for maintaining the efficiency of the army. The care of these animals formed the vital part of the military administration. Medical care and proper treatment of these animals were essential for the utilization of their services in the warfare. Special books were written on the diseases of horses and elephants and their care. As S.K. Bhuyan in his book 'Lachit Barphukan and His Times' has said that the elephants, horses and hawks etc were scientifically treated for various ailments. Treatises on treatment of diseases of hawks, elephants (Hastividyanava) and horses are illuminations in this connection.¹⁰

Conclusion: From the above discussion a general picture about the educational system during the Ahom period can be ascertained. A vast range of activities with which the common people under the regime were employed; the paik system was one of such systems which streamlined and systematized the duties. Both formal and informal educations were imparted but it seems that the sphere of influence of informal education was comparatively much stronger as per the coverage among the common people. The royal authority used to control and operate all the able young men of the kingdom according to their skills providing them with ample training under a particular leader. The present thrust on vocational education in formal education had thus a long tradition in Assam under the Ahoms.

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⁷ Mukherji, R.K., A History of Indian Shipping and Maritime Activity, 1912, pp. 225

⁸ Gait, E., HA, p. 155

⁹ Bhuyan, S.K., Lachit Barphukan and His Times, p. 15

¹⁰ Bhuyan, S.K., op.cit. pp. 15