

The Commencement of Education in Garo Hills of Meghalaya: Its Continuity and Change

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An Abstract:

It was a known fact that the British Officials realized the no better solution to help the Garo but except requesting and seeking help from the Christian Missionaries to deal and civilize them. On their invitation, the first Christian Mission Centre was set up in 1826 at Singimari. The missionaries also set up a school to educate the Garo Children. Again after twenty years i.e in 1847, another School was established specifically for Garo in Goalpara by Capt. Jenkins. Therefore many educational institutions were setting up by the Government as well as the missionaries.

It is imperative to mention here that education scenario in Garo Hills is not up to the mark. After India becomes an independent country in 1947 many initiatives were taken by the government to disseminate formal education for the Garo. Eventually the progress in education is improved very much. Presently the government and the Christian missionaries are engaging and shouldering with the task of providing quality education to one and all, and the level of education scenario has improved very much.

Introduction:

Prior to the advent the British, the Garo were still ignorant and illiterate. In those days the Garo were considered as 'savages' as they used to collect human heads for traditional ceremonies and for their social distinctions, they raided the adjacent places or other villages in the hill and escaped with captives or heads of the victims. Head hunting was thus widely practiced as a symbol of chivalry and such possessed of such marketable value.

Informal Education:

Thought informal education preceded Christianity. In fact the Bachelors' Dormitory was the only traditional institute which could be considered as centre of learning among the Garos. Nokpante or the Bachelors' Dormitory, where according to the Garo custom, all the adolescents of the village clubbed together at night. All the bachelors/unmarried boys slept there. They usually went there after their super and slept at night. The Nokpante divided into two parts-one in the verandah with the enclosed with walls which formed the sleeping room where young men talked heroic deeds of their ancestors were told by the elders in songs and other songs were sung before they went to bed and other part was the verandah. The verandah was used as a sort of School room for learning various arts and crafts of wood, cane, bamboo etc.

The old and experienced men of the village came to the Nokpante and taught the young boys how to curve, make baskets, implements and other useful arts. The Nokpante served as

informal institution where the various training on Arts, Culture, discipline, sense of duty and also values were imparted at the right time so that he would not depart from it. Garo Girls had no separate house for sleeping at night. They slept in the same house together with their parents where room was aside for them. They were rendered immediate and complete care of their parents. Girls were trained in their respective works in their houses.

Formal Education during the British Rule:

With the advent of Christianity, western Education was introduced by missionaries, the traditional 'Nokpante or Bachelors' Dormitory system where all young boys slept together in one room had become inconvenient to study. The opening of formal schools by the missionaries in villages, the boys were thrown around the teachers in their quarters instead of Nokpante. In the villages, when the middle and high schools were opened, the Nokpante had been replaced by hostels. Though the families made the houses for the boys, they were not under such rules and regulations of the traditional Nokpante. With the passage of time and with rapid growth of civilization, the traditional Nokpante had been losing its importance and its very existence.

David Scott, a magistrate of Rangpur of the erstwhile Bengal was the first British Official who initiated the idea of setting up Schools for educating and civilizing the Garo. It was under David Scott's efforts that the American Baptist Missionaries was requested to come to Garo Hills with the objective to educate the Garos.

David Scott as an official of the British Government was given the responsibility to administer the affairs of all the areas of Garo Hills as well as to look into the disputes over trade, tolls and markets in the frontier regions. As the administrator he was also given the responsibility to look into the affairs of the Zamindars adjoining Garo Hills. Therefore he was familiar with Garo affairs. His extensive tour to Garo frontiers after which he urged upon the Authorities to make possible efforts to reduce the Garo from their "Utter Backwardness" by introducing education and Christianity among Garo. On his own effort, he educated good looking Garo boys whom he captured during positive expeditions. They were afterwards employed as interpreters at the courts and recruited as frontiers police. But most of them were not satisfied. Little education could not improve them. Having failed to educate them Scott wrote to the Calcutta Council on 1819 for permission to invite missionaries to undertake humanitarian activities among Garos. In 1822, with prior consent of Calcutta Council, he wrote to Serampur Mission requesting to extend their mission work till Garo Hills. But on 5th March, 1825 First Anglo- Burma War broke out, he was transferred from Garo Hills. On November 20th 1823, he was appointed as the political agent of Governor- Governor- General for North- East frontier in addition to his duty as Civil Commissioner.

David Scott did not give up his intention to educate the Garo though he could not arrange missionaries from Serampur Mission Centre. Eventually he came into contact with Bishop Haber at Calcutta and requested him to help the Garos through missionary service. Also David Scott

invited missionaries from Sylhet to establish in Garo Hills, a Hill Station at a height of about 18,000 feet where the climate was moderate. However his invitation was not responded by the missionaries.

The Missionary policy of the British Government was more interesting. They identified the Garos as ‘Savages and barbarous and endeavoured to civilized’ them through Christian religion. The violent practices of raids, head hunting, preservation of skull, witchcraft, were successfully suppressed through administrative actions. Thereafter a Government Missionary School was opened at Singimari in 1826 to 1829. Today Singimari was better known as Hallidayganj, an insignificant village while it was a flourishing trading centre and a Headquarter during British rule. This school at this place happened to be the first Bengali Medium School in North – East India.

During the British periods there are two types of Schools, one under the supervision of American Baptist Mission with grant-in-Aid from Government and second under direct control of the Government. The first High School in Garo Hills was established in 1934. In 1847 another Government School specifically for the Garo students was opened at Goalpara. The objective of setting up of this school was to educate and mould the wild behaviours of the Garo students. Kanor Jekins was given with the responsibility to look after this school. In the beginning the School did not attract any Garo students, however after an announcement was made at Rongjuli, a market of the Garo that there would be a free lodging, fooding and clothing for those who will be studying in that school. The news had spread faster to every nook and corner of every Garo village. Soon Omed W. Momin, Ramsing and Jongrin enrooted into Goalpara to study in that school. Thus, all of them in spite of their parent’s misgivings started off from their village called “Watrepara”. Omed was over 20 years of age and the others were about 12 and 13 years. They joy fully marched through the hills and carrying their doubled edged swords and blazing the jungle on either side. They rested and had midday meal under the tree and continued rest of the journey 20 more miles to reach Goalpara. Ultimately after long walk in the plain roads which they felt more difficult than hills they reached Goalpara.

Omed and others entered the school and found many Rabhas, Hindus and Muslims were studying English, Bengali and Persian. When Omed introduced himself and his group the school master Pintu Babu remarked, “You are too old; you better go home others may stay”. On hearing that remark of School Master, Omed’s friends protested. Finally the school in charge asked Omed to look after younger boys. Then some more Garo students from other villages joined in that same school and the total enrolment of Garo students increased into twelve only. From among the Garo students of that School, only Gongaram and Omed passed out the examination. Eventually Gangaram became a Pastor of a local church while Omed became an interpreter of the Government officials. Again more boys came and admitted in the school and total number of Garo students was 12 (Twelve). Moreover three boys Omed, Jongrin and Rongja were enlisted in

the regiment of Sepoys. Ramke and other went back to Goalpara to continue their study in which Ramke did well and quick to learn Bengali.

Besides Goalpara school, the British also opened a school at Rongjuli, the biggest Garo village in those days. Ramke W. Momin, a former student of Goalpara School was invited to teach in Rongjuli School and from there he was sent to Guwahati Normal School for further study.

Ramke W. Momin was also the founder member of Damra School. He started this school in 1866 with the motive to teach Garo boys and girls to acquire new knowledge and new ideas. However the Damra School was shifted to Goalpara in 1873 and finally it was shifted again to Tura in 1878. In 1867 another was established at Rajasimla School and Fokira W. Momin, a brother of Ramke was appointed as a teacher for this new school. It was reported that in 1868, there were 20 students both boys and girls (13 Garo boys and 7 girls) Rajasimla School. In 1872 the total enrolment of the Rajasimla School was increased to 34.

Besides the Goalpara School, the America Baptist Missionaries opened a School in Goalpara to meet growing demand of education for Garo boys and girls. First designated missionaries for the Garo arrived at Goalpara in 1867 on 3rd October 3rd, 1867. Moreover Omed, Ramke and Rangku worked together in their mission. At Goalpara, Ramke and his friend continued to stay in Goalpara to assist the mission work and help Stoddard to learn Garo language. On 15th January 1872 Rev. Keith and Mrs Keith, Missionaries was deputed by the Mission Council to work in the mission fields specifically for the Garo. Mrs Keith opened a school in 1874 for Garo girls and called it a boarding school. There are 12 Garo girls from Rajasimla. However that school continued for one year only and it was shut down on account ill health of Mrs. Keith. The Garo girls who joined that school shifted to village Boys' School.

The Headquarters of Mission continued to be located in Goalpara till 1878. In the mission school all boys were taught Bengali texts, arithmetic and geography only through Bengali medium and simple Garo Texts written in Bengali script, while girls read only Bengali texts. In 1872, there were 14 village school and one Normal school in Garo Hills.

In January 1873 Captain W.J. Williamson, the first Deputy Commissioner of Garo Hills visited the schools at Nabari, Rajasimla, Rongjuli and Damra where he found 13,26,34 and 24 students respectively. Williamson inspected other parts of Garo Hills and found that there no schools in Western part of Garo Hills. The Government of Bengal on suggestion of Deputy Commissioner established Government Schools at Gossaigaon, Rewak and Kabulpara. The growth and development of educational institutions in Garo Hills among Garos revealed certain features. First it was the product of Goalpara School which opened up the minds of Garos. Secondly, it was Ramke who promoted the course of education among Garos. Thirdly it was Government having clear policy to open the school more for reformation from their savage habits rather than real education. Lastly it was the policy of Government to shift

responsibility of education to missionaries who had done sincerely to provide education in addition to converting into Christianity. Thus, education enlightened the darkness and ignorance and changed the behaviors of Garo.

Education during the Post Independence Period:

After India got independence Garo Hills had shown remarkable progress in the field of Education. The Garo Hills Autonomous District Council was inaugurated in 1953. It functions according to the special provision contained in the Sixth Scheduled of Indian Constitution. The motive of setting up this council was to give an opportunity to tribe to administer and rule themselves according to their own customs and traditions. The Garo Hills Autonomous District Councils comprising of elected members were empowered to establish, build or manage Primary Education within its own jurisdiction. In 1960 the Autonomous District Council accepted the proposal of State Government to transfer all existing Primary Schools to it. In retrospective it was found that 'in 1958 that the Government of Assam initiated the formal transfer of Primary Education to the District Council laying down condition and modalities for such transfer vide letter no TAD/EDU/40/51/170 Dated 21st April 1958 (Bareh Hamlet on Progress of Education in Meghalaya, 1996). The transfer of Primary Education to Autonomous District Council had taken place earlier on June 1961. However due to many problems the Council not manage and run the schools in the region. Thereafter the State Government by notification no DCA/2/80/5, January 1980 constituted a three members Commission to into inquire into the various aspects of Primary Education in the Autonomous District Council. The Commission in 1980 recommended that the State Government should take over the Administration of Primary Education in Garo Hills. The task was easy in Garo Hills as the Autonomous District Council Cooperated well and the entire staff strength was placed at the disposal of administrator other than salaries, which every teacher posted in sanctioned post received, the schools were sanctioned various non-recurring grants for different purposes like building, furniture, items for games and sports and books, by 1951 there were 17,710 literate persons in Garo Hills,. By 1961 it rose 61,334 and by 1971 the literate person had risen to 95,825(Government of India, 1977). In Garo Hills, at the time of transfer from Autonomous District Council to State Government there were different type of schools were shown table.

Sl.No	Type of Schools	Numbers of Schools
1	Government or Private School	207
2	Junior Basic School	44
3	District Council Schools	218

Source: The Report on Primary Education in Garo Hills ADC, 1980.

As stated earlier, the responsibilities of primary education rested with District Councils since 1961. The Autonomous District Councils in Meghalaya including the Garo Hills

Autonomous District Council had miserably failed to manage and run the affairs of primary education. The mismanagement of primary education by Autonomous District Council in Meghalaya has affected the students as well the teaching community. Apparently the inability of the Autonomous District Council to pay the salary of teachers resulted to shutting down schools. Primary Teachers' agitations are manifested in different forms such as strikes, procession mass casual leaves. In the second half of 1979 the teachers started to go on indefinite strikes. The situation in Garo Hills was going from bad to worse,. Under these circumstances the Government of Meghalaya appointed a Commission to examine, assess, and analyze the problem related primary education in the state.

On the other hand, the efforts of Christian Missionaries to spread education in Garo Hills proved to be a successful one. They set up more educational institutions in Garo Hills. The number of Primary Schools in fact had risen up leaps and bounds for which we have on record, the number of schools stood as follows, in 1960-61, primary schools were 312 in Garo Hills. In Khasi Hills there were 258 and Jaintia Hills only 191 primary schools. In 1990-1991 the numbers of schools in Garo Hills increased to primary schools with 3021 primary school teachers.

Primary Education in Garo Hills: The Present Scenario

Due to the failure of the Autonomous District to run and manage the primary education it led to agitations and indefinite strikes which completely paralyzed the primary educational sector. Therefore under such circumstance, the Autonomous District surrendered the power of managing of Primary School in 1980. Thereafter the state Government has taken the responsibility to run all those schools which used to be managed by Autonomous District Council. Since 1990-1991, New Pattern of Education (10+2+3) was adopted, the primary schools comprised classes-I-IV and Upper Primary constituted V-VII. Many reasons had been pointed out regarding the tardy progress of primary education in East Garo Hills District. The district is still backward in terms of roads and other means of communication networks. It is more different due to topography of the district and the remoteness of the area. In Garo Hills Villages or habitations shifted because of the practice of *Jhum Cultivation*. The Primary education has the potential of fulfilling the constitutional directive providing Free and Compulsory Education to all children up to the age of fourteen years.

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