CHAPTER IX

ACHIEVEMENTS AND FAILURES
It will be seen from the foregoing chapters that after the annexation of Assam, in 1826, the British authorities found in it a few educational institutions on traditional lines in a moribund condition. Before long, a secular system of education had begun in response to the demand from the Government that needed cheaper local officers and clerks. Missionaries also arrived in the scene for the spread of the gospel and they introduced a system of instruction suited to their own needs. A complex educational system thus developed in this multi-tribal and multi-linguistic province. Lord William Bentinck's Resolution of 1835 laid down that all efforts should be made and funds expended for the promotion of European literature and science and that the places of oriental learning were to be retained so long as there was a demand for them. As a result, throughout India instruction in English and the increasing number of English institutions outstripped the very ideal of oriental learning and there had not been simultaneous improvement or output in the vernaculars of our country till 1854. But this was otherwise in Assam. Here, the motto of the Government was English education for the few and the development of vernacular, particularly Bengali, for the many. The heterogeneous character of the tribes, races and tongues inhabiting the

hills and plains led the Government of Bengal to adopt
the policy of limiting, as much as possible, the numerous
languages and dialects. Teaching through the medium of
English and Bengali, it was felt, would promote uniformity
and ultimately bring the people of Assam on the same footing
in civilization as the people of other British provinces.
Consequently, justice was not meted out to the vernaculars
of the province excepting a little diffusion of Assamese
through the Missionary agency whom the Government allowed
to take any measure suited to the circumstances or according
to their needs and requirements.

With the commencement of the second half of the
nineteenth century, the disastrous effect of depriving a
large section of the population from the benefits of education through their mother tongues was keenly felt; criticisms
were made on the character and scope of the prevalent system of instruction. The doctrine then in vogue had fallen into disrepute and, therefore, in its stead, a thorough and comprehensive educational code for all was drawn up in the despatch of 1854. Later, we find that the Education Commission of 1882, the Resolutions of 1904 and 1913 modified the policy and plan to suit the needs of the time, but original outlines as laid down in 1854 remained unaltered.

As a result of these successive steps at the end of
the period under review, there had developed a system of
public instruction the influence of which extended in varying degrees throughout the province. The total number of scholars known to the Education Department to be under instruction reached about two and half lakhs in course of ninety-three years whereas at the time of commencement of our period only a few could read and write. Table VII gives us educable population at these three stages of education. It shows that, before 1854, the percentage of pupils under instruction in primary schools was less than one. It rose to 2.68% in 1853-54, 4.44% in 1874-75 and 20.61% in 1918-19. The percentage of pupils in secondary schools under instruction increased from .34 in 1834-35 to 4.23 in 1874-75 and 14.78 in 1918-19. In the twentieth century emphasis was laid on primary education. The percentages of primary and secondary education were 11.33 and 5.94 respectively in 1901-02. The percentage of pupils in university stage under instruction was 1.90 in 1901-02, and it rose to 15.88 in 1918-19. The percentage of enrolment in special education was very poor. Further, Table I shows that the percentage of total enrolment including all kinds of education to total educable population in the years 1854, 1875, 1882, 1902 and 1919 were 1.61, 3.34, 4.35, 8.01 and 15.21 respectively which indicate a steady increase.

Apart from this progress in education, the modernisation of education on western lines created a middle class intelligentia with liberal ideas. To this class belonged the celebrities like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan,
Gunaviram Barua, Hemchandra Barua and several others who began to spread new ideas by attacking the social evils like *purdah* of women and opium eating as well as other vices of the Assamese society. The diffusion of education among the women of urban areas ultimately broke down the conservatism of the rural areas against female education. Every boy in the school was taught to hate opium. The Deputy Inspector of Nowgong wrote in his annual report of 1876-77, "I have never come to know any instance of a school boy being addicted to that vicious habit". The same effect was seen even in other parts of the province which was apparent from the fact that while the volume of trade showed an increase in various commodities, the consumption of opium was on the decrease. Though the percentage of educated people was small, the latter played an important role in turning their countrymen towards a new way of life by breaking down the caste prejudices and particularly by their new outlook towards the so-called untouchables. It was education that compelled the Brahmins and the Sudras, the upper and lower classes of the society, to sit side by side, to touch each other and to talk freely when they entered in the schools. The attempt of the Christian Missions to collect the outcastes and the tribal people roused the educated people to their degraded

3. Ibid.
conditions and it was from that time the caste Hindus bestirred themselves to recognise the backward communities as their fellow brothers.

Inspite of this steady progress, the table 1 at Appendix shows how colossal was the problem of illiteracy and ignorance of the masses who were out of the doors of learning. Even at the end of our period under review, a large section of the population was not accustomed to education and they beheld little advantage from it. The shortcomings of the mass education in point of quantity are demonstrated from the fact that four villages out of five were without a school and only 3.3 percent out of total population received education. In the field of primary education out of eight lakh of educable children only one and half lakhs received instruction in four thousand schools. Throughout the nineteenth century the education which was imparted in the primary stage continued to be of the simplest and more rudimentary kind. The highest of ambition of the pupils was simply to read and write — a knowledge which would seldom make them fit for discharging any higher duties than those of the village accountants. The reasons were not far to seek. The general education of the average primary school-teachers was miserably poor. Training which was imparted to a teacher did not mean training him in the art of pedagogy; it meant an attempt to improve his general education. Hence they attempted in one year or so, to go through the upper primary or middle vernacular courses with a top dressing of
the art and theory of teaching superadded. Training as interpreted in relation to primary education was merely a despairing attempt to supply by special means some part of what was wanting in the teachers' general equipment. Apart from the improper training, low remuneration was mainly responsible for leaving the education of primary schools in the hands of poorly educated persons. Under such a system standard of education imparted cannot but be very low. Secondly, frequent change in curriculum and text books stood in the progress of primary education. The general trend of curricular revision from time to time made it more complex and elaborate, and to add subject after subject. In the early years, the curriculum became crammed in an attempt to spread western knowledge among the masses. After 1872, an oversimplification began; and this move, commended by the Indian Education Commission was followed throughout the nineteenth century. At the commencement of the present century a counter move against oversimplification set in. This period showed the gradual enrichment of curriculum and this tendency continued till the end of the period under review. But, all along, the primary system was treated as a preparation for secondary school course and, consequently, children were pushed on from one book to another without regard to their capacity, and their memories were in too many instances overtaxed, while the reasoning faculties and the co-ordination of primary education with the immediate
environment were scarcely ever brought into exercise. Not infrequently, therefore, the improved curriculum remained on paper and the success in qualitative aspect continued to be unsatisfactory.

Wastage and stagnation posed a serious problem in the primary education. Wastage meant the premature withdrawal of children from primary schools while stagnation meant the retention of a child in the same class for more than one year. The causes of these two were more or less the same; and these were poverty, ignorance and conservatism of the people. Poverty compelled the guardians to withdraw children from schools at a very early age and engage them in some occupation to balance the family budget. Further, the ignorance and conservatism of the rural population led them to prevent the children to attend the class more than one or two years, for they had the fear that the knowledge the children would acquire more, they would be unwilling to take themselves to the hereditary employments in the villages, preferring to idle away their times, and becoming encumbrances to them and sources of mischief to others. Stagnation was due to irregular attention, inefficient teaching, overloaded syllabus beyond the capacity of the pupils. Both these defects were interrelated, and when one became acute, the other followed. These two defects invariably led to a considerable decline in the number of the pupils. The following table shows wastage and stagnation during the
It may be mentioned in this connection that the wastage increased with the multiplication of schools. Prior to 1882 the number of schools were not many since education was not sufficiently imparted to the educable people of Assam and as such the wastage in that period was limited. In the opening years of the present century with enormous increase in number of primary schools wastage posed a serious problem to the Government of Assam.

Coming to the field of secondary education, we find that throught the period under review, the officials' attempts aimed quantitative and not at qualitative expansion of secondary education. This they wanted to achieve by encouraging private enterprise but maintaining at the same time a few Government institutions as 'models'. This was a clear departure from the policy of withdrawal of the Government from direct management of educational

* Report on the Progress of Education in Assam, 1913. 17, P. 49.
institutions as recommended by the Education Commission of 1882. In its attempt to make model institutions, the Government had to spend huge amounts on the few institutions maintained by it, consequently, more numerous private secondary schools practically remained starving which retarded their proper growth. There was also a gulf of difference in educational standard of the Government, sponsored and private schools. The inefficiency in the latter two was caused by the inadequate funds, for which they were not only poorly staffed, but their teachers were poorly paid. Moreover, the declaration of the Government of India in 1896 that "No teacher should be allowed to teach without a certificate that he has qualified to do so", enhanced a confusing and uncertain state in the field of secondary education. Without multiplying and improving the training centre for secondary teachers of Assam, the Government created a great demand for trained teachers and this exaggerated importance attached to the training led the authorities to appoint trained teachers in Government schools only. Consequently, dearth of trained teacher in private or aided institutions lowered their standard. It was, therefore, urged that Government should close its institutions and use the fund so saved for giving larger grants to private schools and also provide

4. Progress of Education in India, 1897-1902; P.197.
training facilities by the openings of new centres to maintain a decent and uniform standard in secondary level of education.

Moreover, the system of education followed in secondary stage continued to be excessively literary and insufficiently vocational in character. Owing to the stringency of finances and a few other reasons, as already stated, industrial and technical, agricultural and other professional education remained stagnant and this resulted in economic backwardness of the province. Moreover, literary education made people in many cases averse to non-cultural professions. When in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a vocational bias was given in the curriculum of secondary schools, the unwillingness of the people did much to embarrass the practical working of this laudable project. This tendency gave them a narrow as well as exclusive views of the advantages of education; and the result was that practical sciences could not take precedence over literature and poetry except in overburdening the curriculum of secondary schools.

Like the secondary education the condition of the collegiate education was also far from being satisfactory. Although there were two secondary colleges for the spread of higher education, provision for professional and technical education was extremely inadequate. Nowhere in Assam, a professional college of any kind was established except the Earle Law College at Gauhati with limited accommodation. Even
in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the supply of English educated persons in high school level outgrew the demand for jobs. Although the problem of unemployment in Assam was then not so acute, yet there were fair possibilities of giving birth to a younger generation, ill-regulated, averse to discipline and discontented. Their youthful energies, therefore, need be canalised and given training according to their aptitudes so that they may be usefully employed in diverse avenues of community’s life.

Above all, multiplication of examination was the worst feature at all stages in the system of education in Assam as elsewhere in India. Public examinations, the innovation of the mid-nineteenth century, were unknown as an instrument of general education in ancient India, nor did they figure prominently in the Education Despatch of 1864. In between 1865 and 1872, they grew in extravagant dimensions and their influence dominated the whole system of education. At all levels from childhood to adolescence as if, examination was the summon bonum in the life of a pupil. The teachers were carried away by the same error and instead of giving a solid and well grounded education to the students, they prepared them only for examination. All forms of training which did not admit of being tested by written examinations were liable to be neglected. The result was the abnormal development of memory in preference to all other faculties of mind. However, in the first decade of the twentieth
century, examinations like Middle English, Middle Vernacular were done away with and they were substituted by periodical tests by Inspecting agencies. But, the innovation did not inspire confidence. The teachers had to prove their worth by promoting the pupils in a somewhat slipshod way. The demoralising tendencies which public examinations engendered were further encouraged by the practice of sanctioning grants to aided institutions upon the results shown in the examinations. The system adopted in the first instance on the strength of English precedents was advantageous in the sense that it afforded the direct stimulus to the teachers; but experience showed that to whatever grades of schools it was applied, it was disastrous in the results and uncertain in the financial effects. It disorganised the finances of schools by reasons of fluctuations in the grants, it ignored the work done by teachers for dull and backward pupils and it led to children being educated solely with a view to passing examinations. It was no small compliment to the authorities in Assam that they realised the defects and, before long, replaced it by tests of efficiency depending on the number of scholars in attendance, the circumstances of the locality, the qualifications of the teachers, the nature of the instructions given and the outlay from other private sources. While the aim of education was thus diverted to a healthier channel and all the principles had generally been accepted, the economic backwardness of the state militated against the progress of
education which demanded a continually increasing outlay from public funds. Under the British system the plans and programmes for the development of education were generally prepared with elaborate details by the authorities at Home without any reference to or consideration of the availability of funds for the purpose. They wanted to impose a scheme without any consideration of the ability of the people of a particular province. Not unoften, therefore, the theories could not be translated into practice and as a result of the consequent frustration, the fundamental scheme of 1854, 1882, 1904 and 1913 were given effect to in a mutilated form in Assam as elsewhere in India. Ultimately the educationists felt indifferent to even what little was actually possible for them to do. In a letter to the Government of Assam in 1918, the Director of Public Instruction was constrained to remark:

"All kinds of education indeed introduced, some of them were only in the initial stage of development, some improved much of later years,......................, but none of them achieved perfectness. The majority of the teachers were inexpert and un-interested, few had any zeal or natural aptitude for teaching, there was little or no discipline of instruction,......................neither boys nor masters habitually prepared for their day's works, the supervision over the actual works of class teaching was lacking in authority, in persistence and in purpose and generally speaking there was a want of life in the whole educational atmosphere."

A radical reorientation of the entire educational system was, therefore, the urgent need of the hour. 

this, in the words of an eminent educationist, "the relative importance of literacy and learning, general and special education should be understood and maintained, the right kind of teachers are the pivot and test of all education should be chosen and trained. The slavish copying of foreign methods which were essential for nourishing and rejuvenating learning in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly lost their importance in twentieth century, and what was needed most in the early part of the present century was the policy of synthesis rather than substitution."