Chapter II

The Advent of the American Baptist Missionaries

The advent of the Baptist Missionaries to Assam is an important historical event which is directly related to the British annexation of Assam. Why and how the British Missionaries came to Assam for Christian evangelistic work will be discussed in this chapter. We have to go back to the end of the reign of Ahom rulers in early nineteenth century to understand the political and social situation of Assam at that time.

Final days of Ahom kingdom and British annexation:

The Ahom dynasty ruled Assam from 1228 to 1826. The intelligent and powerful Ahoms were successful in ruling Assam until 1811. After the death of Kamaleswar Singha, Chandrakanta Singha became the king of the Ahom dynasty in 1811 with his capital at Jorhat. Purnananda Buragohain continued to be the premier. This is the beginning of the waning years of Ahom rule, which followed the annexation of Assam by the British. Chandrakanta was too young to take responsibility as the king at the time of coronation. Purnananda was appointed as defacto ruler. Purnananda was practically in power for all the administration of the kingdom. In the meantime at the death of Kolia Bhomora Borphukan, Badanchandra Borphukan was appointed as viceroy and stationed at Guwahati.

Purnananda came to know the atrocities and gross exactions of Badan towards the people in Guwahati. Unfortunately, a situation of distrust came into being between the premier and the viceroy. When Purnananda realized that Badan was involved in a
conspiracy to plan to kill him, he became very firm against Badan. Purnananda deputed Moheswar Parvatia Phukan to arrest Badan. However, Badan came to know the plan and started to Calcutta by boat on September 26, 1815 (Devi, 1987:327).

Badan met the British Governor General at Calcutta, and requested military assistance to preserve the rights of the people of Assam. But the British Governor General refused to help Badan. Coincidentally at the East India Company meeting, Badan met emissaries from the king of Burma. Badan then approached the king of Burma Bodawpaya, at his capital city, Amarapur for help (Majumdar 1970 : 128). Badan again repeated the misrepresentation regarding the conduct of Purnananda, stating that because of his misuse of power, the lives of all in Ahom kingdom were in danger. He waited in Burma for sixteen months. At last Badan obtained a promise of help from Bodawpaya, the king of Burma, who had been persuaded by his wife who was one of Badan’s relatives. Badan invaded Assam in March 1817 with the assistance of about sixteen thousand militaries. Purnananda confronted the Burmese and fought bravely, but the Burmese won the war. At this juncture Purnananda died, which was an unexpected situation. At that time Purnananda was a great leader in all respects. His loss was a terrible one for the cause of the Ahom kingdom. The Burmese continued their march and occupied the capital of Jorhat. Along their march to Jorhat, the Burmese burnt down the villages and tortured people inhumanly. The Burmese now occupied the capital and Badan was formally reinstated. Chandrakanta continued to rule with Badan as the defacto ruler. The Burmese were paid a large sum of money for the trouble and expenses of the expedition and returned to their own country in April 1817 (Gait 1992:215).
Badan became very revengeful towards his former enemies. Following a conspiracy led by the mother of the king, Badan was finally assassinated by Rup Singh. Chandrakanta was deposed, and Brajanath became the ruler with his ten year old son Purandar on the throne. The friends of the murdered Badan fled to Burma and informed the Burmese king of the situation. He sent a new force to Assam in February 1819, under general Ala Mingi. The Burmese again occupied the capital. Purandar fled to Bengal and Chandrakanta got reinstated. The Burmese became virtual rulers and started harassing the people. In that situation, Chandrakanta fled to Bengal. The Burmese ruled Assam from 1821 to 1825.

The days of the Burmese occupation of Assam were the darkest days in the history of Assam. Edward Gait states:

The oppression of the Burmese became more and more unbearable, and no one could be sure of his wealth or reputation, or even of his life. Not only did they rob everyone who had anything worth taking, but they wantonly burnt down villages, and even temples, violated the chastity of women, old and young alike, and put large numbers of innocent persons to death (Gait 1992:219).

During the Burmese occupation, many of the Assamese population fled to the jungle and gave up their cultivation. To be alive was the quest for all. Many fled to the hills of Jaintia, Manipur and other parts of the country (Downs 1971:3 and Gait 1992:220).

The Burmese, in their ambition to annex more territories, indulged in acts of aggression into the adjoining territories of East India Company. The Burmese were given a crushing blow in retaliation by the East India Company, leading finally to the treaty of Yandaboo, signed on February 24, 1826 (Devi 1987:339). According to the
Yandaboo treaty, the British gained Assam, Tanasarium and Arakan from the king of Burma, and he agreed, amongst other things, to abstain from all interference in the countries which constituted the province of Assam, and to recognize Gambhir Singh as Raja of Manipur.

When the Burmese left the Brahmaputra valley, the condition of the valley was most deplorable. At least thirty thousand Assamese had been taken away as slaves by the Burmese.

At first, a British agent administered the devastated area of Assam. The British had no interest in the depopulated upper Assam area, since they knew that the revenue will not be sufficient to maintain the area. Arrangements were made with the Bar Senapati of Matak and Sadia Khowa Gohain, rulers of tracts of land in the easternmost extremities of upper Assam. Finally the British decided to experimentally restore an Ahom royal member to the throne of upper Assam. Purandar Singha was installed in 1833 subject to several conditions. He was to heed the advice of a political agent appointed by the British. He was to reform the methods of administering justice. He was also to pay the Company an annual tribute of Rs. 50,000 which was actually very high considering the state of the region (Downs 1983:20).

From 1824 to 1833 a period of nine years upper Assam was under unsettled rule. Lahiri states:

No serious attempts were made by the British officers to heal the wounds caused by the misrule and confusion of the preceding half century. The interim administration set up by the British rather worsened the situation in many respects. The system adopted during these nine years was neither wholly British nor Ahom. It was an admixture of both, and during this interim period, the people neither got the blessings of the enlightened British administration nor the concessions of the indigenous system. Society was in a disorganized state (Lahiri 1994:191).
Claiming that Purandar Singha had failed to meet the conditions of the agreement, the British deposed him and annexed upper Assam in 1838. In 1842 Sadiya and Matak were also brought under direct administration, thus completing the annexation of the entire Brahmaputra valley (Downs 1983:21).

The newly acquired territory was administered as a division of Bengal from 1826 to 1874. The area was constituted into a province in 1874 and was administered by a Chief Commissioner. During the early part of the British rule several things happened. Rebellion against the British was organized by Gomdhar Konwar, Roopchand Konwar and Piyali Phukan in 1828-29. The rebellion was suppressed by hanging Piyali Phukan in 1828.

In consideration for geographical contiguity, historical ties and the convenience of the administration facility, the British annexed Goalpara, Cachar and Sylhet. Gradually annexation was extended to the hill districts - the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the Naga Hills, the North Cachar and Mikir Hills, the Garo Hills and the Lushai Hills. The administration jurisdiction of the province was also extended to include the Northern and North-Eastern Frontier Tracts.

Leaving the chronological historical events, let us have a look at the commercial aspects of the British rule. The British were primarily interested in stabilizing N.E. India politically. They realized that the administrative cost would not be economical. Gradually they discovered the valuable deposits of Assam such as iron, coal and oil. The most valuable aspect was the cultivation of tea. They
established sawmills and coal mining, and explored oil at Digboi in 1890. To transfer these products, construction of rail roads began in 1881.

A change in the economic scenario started with the establishment of tea cultivation by the British in Assam in 1839. As early as 1823, an English adventurer, Robert Bruce, learned about the existence of wild tea in upper Assam. He sent some tea leaves to the superintendent of the Botanical gardens in Calcutta, who concluded that the tea variety was not suitable for drinking tea. However, Bruce continued to argue the matter that a cross breed of the indigenous and imported teas would definitely be a solution. Nothing more was done until 1832. Finally Bruce was appointed as superintendent of the Government Tea Forest, with headquarters near Sadiya.

Since the tea gardens near Sadiya were not prospering, Bruce transferred his work location to Jaipur near Naharkatia, where he found progressive output. In 1837, Bruce shipped 46 boxes of tea to Calcutta.

The tea garden areas of upper Assam were important field locations for the American Baptist Missionaries for propagation of Christianity. The tea planters could not procure the required labour force for the tea cultivation from the indigenous people. As a result they had to bring the labourers from other parts of India, such as Chota Nagpur. Some of the migrated labourers were already converted Christians. The Chaotals, Munda and other labour groups represent a distinct social group of Assam, with their own traditional cultural identity. The tea garden labourers did not have a deep rooted religion at the time of their initial migration period. As a result the
Missionaries had easy access to them, and were able to impress them with the teachings of the Christian gospel.

**Impact of British annexation of Assam:**

One of the main effects of the Yandaboo treaty was that for the first time in the history of the region, Assam was linked politically with the main stream of Indian history. Although there had been earlier cultural contacts with the Aryan India, North East India existed outside the political structures of the major powers of the rest of the India. The gradual extension of the British administration brought extensive changes to the entire area politically, socio-culturally and economically.

David Scott served as Commissioner of Assam from 1826 until his death in 1831. Scott was assisted by Captain Davidson. Franklin Jenkins was Commissioner of Assam from 1834 to 1861. These two remarkable men played key roles in developing administrative policies designed to serve the interest both of Government and the peoples of the region (Downs 1983:23).

Francis Jenkins was the son of an English clergyman and had strong evangelical commitments. Jenkins invited the first American Baptist Missionaries to Assam. It was not only an invitation. Jenkins helped the Missionaries, in many ways including providing government funds to support some of their non-evangelistic work. He also made his own contributions to the Baptist Missionaries.

**Advent of the American Baptist Missionary:**

During the years 1793 to 1813, the East India Company was persuaded from England to promote useful knowledge among Indians and to impart religious and
moral education. The British evangelicals proposed to include such a clause at the time of the renewal of the charter of the Company in 1793. However, court of directors opposed the move and the proposal was turned down. But in the same year William Carey, the first British Missionary arrived in Calcutta. Carey was not allowed to preach within the company territory. As a result Carey had to make his headquarter at Serampore under the Danish government (Neog 1983: 0.59 & 0.67). Due to the public support in England the new Charter Act of 1813 permitted the British Missionaries to enter India for spread of Christian religion with some conditions attached. One of the condition was to observe religious neutrality and non-interference in the religions of Indian people. Carey translated the Bible into the local languages of India including one in Assamese. Krishna Pal, who was the earliest convert of Carey, was deputed to North East India for the spread of the Christian Gospel. Ksishna Pal was not successful in conversion to Christianity excepting a very few. In 1829 a branch of the mission was started at Guwahati under James Ray, under the patronage of the British Commissioner David Scott. But upto 1836, only six individuals were baptized. William Robinson, successor of Krishna Pal also could not do any remarkable change in conversion of people into Christianity. Time to time frontier tribes carried their raids into the British territories. For the political and security reasons David Scott planned to open schools thinking that by providing education, it will be easy to control the disturbed areas. But there were no suitable teachers. Francis Jenkins assuming his charge as Agent to the governor-general in 1834 believed that spread of Christian Gospel will make it easier to control the Khamtis and Singphos and he contacted initially the Serampore Missionaries. As the
response was not encouraging, Jenkins extended invitation to the American Baptist Missionaries to establish a mission center at Sadiya (Barpujari, 1986: X ii). Extract of Jenkin’s letter to the Board of the American Baptist Missionaries which was published in the annual report, 1839 is added in the appendix.

From 1795 to 1812, there was a spiritual awakening in America, called the Second Great Awakening. One part of the awakening took place in 1806 amidst a group of students in a college campus. This college was situated in Williamstown, Massachusetts. During a prayer meeting held in an open field, a sudden thunderstorm sent the attendees scurrying for cover in a haystack. A pledge made in that haystack became the inspiration that gave birth to the American Foreign Mission Movement - the Haystack Movement. A globe atop a pedestal marks the spot today. It is from this college that Dr. Nathan Brown, one of the Baptist Missionaries that later came to Assam, graduated in 1827. As a part of this movement, two American Baptists, Dr. Nathan Brown and Mr. Oliver T. Cutter arrived with their families at Sadiya, in the easternmost part of Assam from Burma. The Missionaries objective was much wider. The object of opening a mission in Assam was ultimately to reach Northern Burma and Western China, along with the intervening tribes. This is where the seeds of the American Baptist Missionary movement started in Assam.

Dr. Nathan Brown and Oliver T. Cutter were in Burma as American Baptist Missionaries. From Burma, after a stop over at Calcutta, Dr. Brown and Mr. Cutter, along with their wives, set out on the Brahmaputra river for Sadiya in three big country boats on November 23, 1835. They reached Guwahati on March 18, 1836 and finally arrived Sadiya on March 23, 1836. It was a long hazardous journey to an
unknown place in country boats. They took up their residence in houses a short
distance away from the British garrison. During their journey, and during the initial
period in Sadiya, they spent their time in learning the Shan language, which they
thought was the language of the locality. But it was a great disappointment when they
realized the Khamtis and Singphos did not understand the Shan language at all. The
language they spoke was totally different. Dr. Brown, who was an expert on
linguistics, learned the language of the people - Assamese, in a short time.

Another disappointment to the Missionaries was that the population of the area
was very low, contrary to their expectations. The language of the Singphos, who lived
sparsely, had little similarity to the Shan language:

Rev. Brown requested a reinforcement of missionaries from the Home Board.
As a reinforcement to the initial mission, Rev. Miles Bronson and Rev. Jacob Thomas,
along with their wives, safely arrived in Calcutta on April 11 and Guwahati on June 3,
1837. They then proceeded on a country boat, facing strong currents on the
Brahmaputra river. It was rainy season in Assam. However, they arrived safely at
Biswanath near Tezpur. From Biswanath, the large country boat in which they
traveled could not progress upstream at all, due to the heavy water current. On June
25th, Rev. Bronson fell dangerously ill of jungle fever. At the same time, it was
impracticable to force the boat up the river against the rapid current. Rev. Thomas
decided to go and to bring medicine for his friend. Rev. Thomas traveled in a small
country boat. Rev. Thomas scarcely came within sight of the mission premises when a
large tree from the riverbank fell on the boat. He was instantly bereft of life. The two
boatmen escaped injury. Mrs. Thomas along with Mr. and Mrs. Bronson, reached Sadiya on July 17, 1837.

It was a great misfortune for Bronson to lose his friend Thomas, who had a dream for Christian evangelistic work. However, the Missionaries continued with their objective, in whatever way they could. Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Cutter ran a small school for the Assamese speaking people. How they managed this school with a limited knowledge of Assamese, and without any books is a matter of surprise today.

The Khamtis were unhappy and could not tolerate the ruling of the British. Considering the unrest situation, Bronson was looking for a suitable safe place to relocate the center from Sadiya. At the request of Robert Bruce, the superintendent of the Government Tea Forest, who had already relocated to Jaipur from Sadiya, Bronson with his wife and Mrs. Thomas moved to Jaipur in April 1838 (Downs 1971: 18-20).

One night in January 1839, the Khamtis attacked the British garrison. Mr. Brown was in the station at that time. Mr. Cutter was in Calcutta on official matters. When he heard the noise of fighting, Brown took shelter on a country boat for the whole night, however, the Khamtis did not do any harm to the Missionaries. The political agent, Col. White, was killed and eighty others were killed or wounded. The British retaliated and eventually forced the Khamtis to submit. The area became depopulated.

Since there were not enough people to teach or preach to, Brown, Cutter, Bronson and their families moved to Jaipur, carrying the printing machine with them, and the station at Sadiya was relinquished on May 12, 1839. The expenses of the
relocation were generously defrayed by Mr. Bruce, Superintendent of tea culture at Jaipur. (American Baptist Mission, Annual Report-Assam 1839: 25)

At Jaipur, Bronson came in contact with the Nagas who lived in nearby hills. These Naga people were from Namsang village. He found the Nagas more friendly in comparison to Singphos. Bronson began to prepare a spelling book and simple catechism in the Namsanghea dialect. These were the first books written in the Naga language. In January 1838, Bronson decided to survey Namsang in order to establish a school and an outstation for the Christian evangelistic work. The Nagas received him with kind hospitality, and cordially approved the objects of his mission. The aged chief promised to send two of his sons to teach the missionary their language, to build houses and provide him with food, and to assist him in every way in their power.

The local British Commander Capt. Hannay and Mr. Bruce encouraged Bronson and donated money to use in producing the spelling book. The British Commissioner, Franklin Jenkins, even wrote the Home Board to send more help to Bronson. The British people thought that this would be a great help in controlling the frontier rebels, and in minimizing the administrative cost.

In late 1839, the Home Board appointed Cyprus Barker and his wife for Naga work. Bronson also recruited in his personal level. His sister, Miss Rodha Bronson, came with Barker. She was the first unmarried Baptist Missionary who came to Assam. Mr. and Mrs. Barker and Miss Bronson arrived at Jaipur on May 14, 1840. Miss Bronson joined her brother at Namsang but fell sick. She returned to Jaipur, but treatment could not save her and she passed away on December 8, 1840.
Although Bronson believed that it was still possible to work with the hill people, the Home Board did not approve his views. The Bronsons, the Cutters and the Barkers were all convinced that the original objective of the mission was impractical. They suggested that the Missionary objective to be turned to the populated Brahmaputra valley. Accordingly, stations at Sibsagar and Nowgong were adopted in 1841. The Sibsagar station was first occupied by Mr. Barker in May, 1841. Mr. Bronson moved from Jaipur to Nagaon in October, 1841.

In support of Sibsagar as the location of a new missionary station, a report was published in the annual report of the American Baptist Missionary (April, 1844), in which the Missionaries discussed their observations relating to the spoken language of Upper Assam and Lower Assam. Sibsagar was chosen because it was in close proximity to Rangpur, Gorgaon and Jorhat, the places where the original Assamese (or Ahoms) made the centres of their power and influence, where the king always resided and in which the Assamese language was spoken in its greatest purity. It also stood in the midst of a dense Assamese population.

The first convert in the Brahmaputra valley was Nidhiram. His family was from Sadiya. He was a student in the school of Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Cutter. In addition, he worked in the Mission Press. His father died at Sadiya just after the Missionaries moved to Jaipur. In order to keep his job at the press, Nidhiram came to Jaipur with his mother. After two months his mother died of cholera. Nidhiram was about ten years old. He then lived with Cutter family where he found ample opportunities to learn religion along with other education. Nidhiram was very intelligent, and he later proved his capabilities as a writer and a committed Christian.
The Missionaries decided to change his Hindu name to Levi Farwell. But he became known as Nidhi Levi Farwell, a combined name. He was baptized by Rev. Bronson on June 13, 1841. The baptism of Nidhiram in June 1841 was the beginning of the Assam Mission.

Bronson finally decided to open a new centre at Nagaon. Barker also decided to move to Guwahati for a new centre in 1843. For the immediate future the American Baptist Missionary did not open any new centres. They performed the mission work from Sibsagar, Nagaon and Guwahati.
Chapter II

Notes & References

1. The letter was published in the annual report of the American Baptist Mission, 1839, page 27-28. From the content of the letter it is clear that the British administration worked closely with the Baptist Missionaries. In fact, Mr. Jenkins planned and developed the scheme of the Missionary’s proposed work. An important statement made by Mr. Jenkins clearly indicates the feeling of “white supremacy” among the British officers.

2. A chart of the Missionary service periods in the Assam Mission, the American Baptist Missionary Union is added as Appendix-B.

3. A map of Sibsagar town published in the annual report of the American Baptist Missionary - Asiatic Mission, April, 1844 is included in the Appendix - C.