CHAPTER - II

SOCIO-CULTURAL HISTORY

A component part of Indian heritage

Assam finds a position in the prehistoric and proto-historic cultural map of India. The most beautiful valleys of Assam have long been the meeting centre of different types of people belonging to various cultural and ethnic groups. The credit of growing a composite culture of variegated colour and magnificence goes to the fact of Assam being the homeland of varying races of men such as Austric, Negroid, Mangoloid, Tibeto-Burmese and Aryan.\(^1\) The people of the land lived in peace and tranquility in hills and plains in olden times of history. In reality, Assam had an expressive history and had close connections with other parts of the world. The special characteristics of the people of Assam resulted from the absorption of different elements and conditions of life. Assamese culture constituted a strong visualizing force in Assamese as well as Indian way of life.

The Aryan or Sanskritised names Pragjyotisha - Kamarupathe names by which Assam was known from the inception of her history, bear testimony to the spread of Aryan culture. The references in the Ramayana, as well as the Mahabharata, indicate

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1. (a) Choudhury, P.C., HCPA., pp. 4-5.
that the country stretched as far as the sea and it was also a hilly country.\(^1\)

The name Assam has come to its present stage as an anglicised form of Ashom. Dr. B.K. Kakati points out in his book "Assamese its Formation and Development" that Asama or peerless may be a sanskritisation of some earlier formation like 'Acham'. In Tai (Ahom), Veham means to be defeated and with the prefix A the formation 'Assam' would mean undefeated. The word Asam was first applied to the men, Ahoms and subsequently to the country they occupied.\(^2\)

The land of Assam though situated at the North Eastern side of India has never been cut-off from the main stream of the cultural life of India. From the very early period Assam associated in the affairs of northern India where Indian civilisation took its birth.\(^3\)

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   (b) Chatterji, S.K., The place of Assam in the History and civilisation of India, Guwahati University, 1970, pp. 11-12.

2. (a) Kakati, B.K., Assamese its Formation and Developments, Guwahati, 1941, pp.1-3.
   (b) Gait, E., HA, pp. 245-246.

3. (a) Barua, B.K., Cultural History of Assam, Guwahati, 1969, p.4.
   (b) Chatterji, S.K., PAHCI, pp. 11 ff.
(1) **Educational Background** :-

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.¹

(a) **Sanskrit learning** :-

Sanskrit learning in Assam was carried on according to the directions of 'Varnacramadharma' and the art of learning was transmitted orally in 'Gurugrihas and hermitages created for the maintenance of the Brahmins. All these facts testify to the existence of 'Gurugrihas', Sanskrit Tolas and village Schools in Assam. The Brahmins endowed with 'Agraharas' maintained Schools or Chatrasalas of their own for the diffusion of the Sanskrit learning and culture.²

There were Gurugrihas and Sanskrit Tolas patronised by the rulers. In these centres, instructions in various branches of studies, including the religious lore were imparted by qualified teachers who were very keen in discharging their duties.³

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2. (a) Choudhury, P.C., HCPA, pp. 377-78.
"The curriculum of studies, the royal sasanas and the existing manuscripts prove that both vidya and kala were cultured here. Besides the vedic studies the subjects on which special emphasis was laid consisted of Abhidhana or Kosa, Ayurveda, Chandalankara, Darsana, Smriti, Stotra, Tantra and Vyakarana, including the Silpa-sastra and Gandharvavidya (Music and Dancing)." 

The manuscripts show that sanchipat from aloe wood (Aquilaria Agallocha) and Tulapat (Cotton leaves) constituted the main writing materials. Books written on such barks were brought to Harsa by Hansavega as presents from Bhaskaravarman. The goose quills, pointed bamboo or wooden pieces, reed, copper, bell-metal, iron and gold were writing materials.

It is remarkable that the earliest sample of Sanskrit Composition may be seen in the inscriptions of the time and some verses contain passages from the works of Kalidasa and Banabhatta. The Nowgeng grant of king Balavarman III for example contains passages from Raghu-vamsa and the style of the Harsacharita introduced by the writer of the Bargaon grant of Ratnapala.

The composition of a few works on varied subjects specially in Sanskrit gives an idea about the Sanskrit education and learning that existed in Assam. Mention can be made of such another early work is that of Hastayurveda by Palakapyamuni. The astronomical work Kamrup Nivandhaniya Khandasadhya was composed here during the period of 7th century A.D. The Kalikapurana is another such work composed during the time in Assam.

(b) Development of Assamese Script and literature:

In the Kanaiverasi Rock inscription at North Guwahati, dated Saka 1127 we find specimens of a few Assamese Characters almost in their present forms. A few treatises written by the Tantrik Siddhas known as the "Bauddhagan O Doha" are found in the Royal Library of Nepal. In these treatises writings may be noticed as the earliest sample of a written speech which may be called 'Kamrupi' and which occupied the status of original speech of Assam. According to Dr. G. Tucci, one of the Composers of these dohas, namely Minanath, was a fisherman hailed from Kamrup. The unwritten songs were literary production of this period.

(c) Architecture:

There is no sufficient materials for writing the history of early architecture in Assam. The king Ratnapala constructed and re-erected temples. Architectures and sculpture had undergone various developments in ancient Assam. The kings of the Pala period with the help of architects and stone workers from other parts of India adorned the land with many temples and palaces. In this context mention may be made of the architectural remains of a stone temple (600 A.D.) called Dah parbatiya and two notable shafts of pillars (C. 1000 A.D.) near Tezpur under Sonitpur district. Architects from other parts of India were appointed for construction of temple and carving of images and made to settle in this country. Other architectural remains are seen at Kamakhya, Hazo, Dabaka, Numaligarh, Sibsagar and Sadiya. The sculptures that have been found in Assam during this period are of gods, goddesses and other semi-divine figures.

(d) Dance and Music:

Dancing and Music are referred to in the mythological accounts, numerous archaeological remains and in the mass of

literary evidences. Siva the popular god of Assam was represented as the master-dancer and musician in Indian mythology. Chitralekha was an exponent of dance and music. Many of the rulers of ancient Assam are found to have engraved various artistic figures absorbed in dance and music on wood and stone. We get references of music and dance in the Mudrarakshasa, a drama composed in the 7th century A.D. by Bisakhadatta, a scholar living in Kamrup during the ruling period of Abanti Barman. Similar references are also found in the writings of Abhinava Gupta, a dramatic commentary writer of 8th century A.D.¹

(e) Games and Hunting:

In ancient Assam Dice and Bhanta (a play with sticks) were very popular games. Hunting was also a favourite game. The plates of Vaihara mention buffalo hunting and the plates of Doobi refer to snaring of deer. The Gauhati Grant of Indrapala indicates the style of catching tiger. This practice of catching tigers, deer, elephants and wild pigs by the use of nets is still continuing in Assam.²

1. (a) Rajkumar, Sarbananda, Music in Assam in the pre-British Age, pp. 73-74.
(b) Neog, N., 'The dancing Maids of Pariharesvara Siva', Souvenir, Assam Sangit Natak Academy, Guwahati, 1959.

(f) Dress and Ornaments:

The dress and ornaments worn by the Assamese men and women were of different styles. There was a class of weavers and the art of dyeing yarn and cloth was known to all. Kalikapurana referred to four classes of dresses such as Karpasi (cotton), Kambala (wool), balka (bark) and Kosaja (silk from cocoons).

(II) General character of medieval education:

Education was imparted from the gurugrihas, schools maintained by private individuals, or at village schools provided by the Brahmins in Agrahara villages. The Brahmin dones of the royal grants were found to have discharged their six-fold traditional duties of which adhyapana was chief of them. The various inscriptions testify that the Brahmin villages were responsible for the teaching of the Vedas, the systems of philosophy and various other branches of learning. Sankaradeva, the great Vaishnava saint of Assam received his early education at the Tola of Brahmin scholar Mahendra Kandali. Non-Brahmin students were thus allowed to study along with the Brahmin students.

The village schools were occasionally found to have been held in the temples. The temples in course of time became centres for studies on the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and

1. Kalikapurana as quoted by Barua, B.K., CHA, p.141.
the Puranas. Very often the priests used to elucidate the philosophy and morals of the Hindu religion in the temple area. The temples were also the scene of social gatherings and festivals. The festivals also included music, dancing recitation, play and pantomime. In this way the village temples played very significant role in the cultural activities of the people. ¹

Thus it is found that the kings were keenly interested in the spread of learning and made large donations for that purpose. ²

The Vedic educational system lingered, during medieval period of Assam, that was in effect restricted to the Brahmins or the nobility and the masses usually had not much admittance to the institutions run by Gurus, e.g. 'Tolas' etc. The preparation of modern system for imparting education was fully absent, education in various branches was displayed through media and methods adapted at that time. The distinguished members of the kings' family, the Gossains and Brahmins and members of the

(b) Altekar, A.S., Education in Ancient India, pp. 38-42.
(c) Barua, B.K., CHA, p.150.
(d) Choudhury, P.C., HCPA, pp.377-79.

2. Barua, B.K., CHA, p. 151.
Priestly class could impart education in Tolas or at home. The 'Karis', the 'Paiks' and the labourers could not have the advantage of formal education.¹

During the Ahom period education was restricted specially to the Brahmins who were absorbed as priests by the kings and nobles. With the propagation of Neo-vaishnavism in Assam by Sankaradeva, the Satras also became centres of education and learning. Main Satras like Barpeta, Kamalabari, Aauniati, Garmur, Dakshinpat etc. used to maintain Sanskrit Tolas and services of renowned scholars were requisitioned to lead those centres.²

In the early period, Sanskrit was made the vehicle of thought and expression in Assam but it is also true that inceptive progress may have been made in the development of Assamese script and the language. It is very interesting that in most of the rock and copper-plate inscriptions of the time writings were in Devanagari script and language was in Sanskrit. The Sanskrit has been interspersed with Prakrit but many of these words and expressions are seen in modern Assamese.³

¹ Basu, N.K., AAA, p. 151.
³ a) Choudhury, P.C., Education in Ancient Assam & the extent of Royal patronage, The Cotton college Diamond Jubilee Commemoration Volume, 1901-1961, Guwahati, 1962, p.120.
Aryan culture had taken its root in Assam since very early times. The people of the state basked under the sunshine of the Aryan culture or Hindu civilisation. The Gurukula system of education in ancient Kamarupa was similar to the educational system of rest of India. Continuation of some regular Tolas in modern Assam provides an example of Gurukula system of education. Sanskrit was the vehicle of thought and expression and among the subjects taught were the grammar, astronomy, law, poetry and philosophy (vedanta, sankhya etc.). The pupils received their education in the dormitories managed by their Guru (Teacher). The pupils were free from tuition fees but as custom they offered voluntary gifts which were called Guru Dakshina and were offered on completion of their course. Education was not a matter of govt. or king's policy but a honorary adventure of Gurus and free from any official intervention. The higher education was mainly restricted to the Brahmins. The Gurukula system of education was developed further and made of popular form during the period of Ahom.

The Satra Institution of Assam was a product of the vaisnavite movement launched by Sankaradeva during fifteenth

2. a) Lekharu, U, (ed), Kathagurucarita, Guwahati, 1987, pp. 28-29
   b) Barua, B.K., CHA, p.153.
3. Majumdar, S.C., Education in Assam, p.5.
and sixteenth centuries, gradually developed in different parts of the land and became a mighty source of educational and cultural activities. In the words of S.N. Sarma, "the cultural history of Assam in respect of the fine arts and crafts, education and learning since the beginning of the sixteenth century till the advent of the British, largely developed centering round vaishnava movement which in turn found expression through the satra institution."

Indeed there was a great development of education in the Ahom age. The ancient Brahmanical system spread due to royal patronage. The Ahoms had their own educational system and it was confined mainly to the royal families and the nobility. Since the rulers themselves adapted to the culture of the subjects nation, their own education ultimately came to decay; although it influenced in no small measure, the growth and development of the education in the medieval period. There was democratisation of education under the impact of the neo-vaisnavite movement. The doors of the Brahminical and Ahom education were opened only to a few; but it was Srimanta Sankaradeva who carried the learning contained in scriptures to the doors of the

common people. Perhaps the most significant event of the Middle Ages in Assam was the growth and development of the Assamese script and literature which found the way for mass education in formal as well as in informal way.¹

(III) Islamic Education :

In medieval India Islamic education spread under the patronage of the Muslim rulers who became masters of the major portion of the country. The principal aim of Islamic education was propagation of Islam, and for this reason Holy Koran was taught in Maktab. Islamic history, Islamic philosophy and tenets of Islam were taught in Madrasas. Another important aim was the propagation of sariyat. Other aims were spread of education among the Muslims, development of morality, character-building, material well-being etc.²

Since Assam was outside the Muslim Rule, the Islamic education did not spread in Assam, as in the rest of the country. However, the impact of Islamic literature was felt in Assam, and in the later period of the Ahom rule, some Islamic

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² Rai, B.C., History of Indian Education, Prakashan Kendra, Lucknow, p. 79.
Institutions at elementary level came into existence in Assam. In fact, during the period of their occupation, the Muhammadan rulers set up several Maktabs in lower Assam. Instruction conveyed to Muslim pupils in these institutions was restricted to learning by the Koran and other religious books. These institutions had three classes of teachers, namely Maulavis, Munshis, Mulas or Meanjees; Arabic and Persian scholars were known as the Maulavis, those who knew only Persian were Munshis, while those taught Koran were called Mulas or Meanjees.1

Maktabs were attached to the Mosques in the last part of the medieval period. The principal aim of the Maktabs was to instruct boys in those portion of the Koran which a Muslim is to know by heart and soul in order to accomplish his namaz. Reading, writing and simple arithmetic were also incorporated in the curriculum.2 In 1792 Dr. J.P. Wade found ten or twelve houses of instruction for the children of Mussalmans at Guwahati and more than twenty at Rangpur (Sibsagar).3


2. Mudaliar, Dr. A. Lakshmanaswami, Education in India, p.17.