

The Contribution Of Christian Missionaries To Assamese Language And Literature

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Abstract : In the history of Assam and Assamese literature, the period of 19th century was specifically significant one. From the beginning of that century Assam experienced political, sociological and economical diminution and all of these situations contributed towards creation of another diminution called intellectual diminution. The contribution of Christian Missionaries towards the development of Assamese language and literature is noteworthy. The arrival of American Baptist Missionaries in Assam was not accidental or sudden happening; rather it was well planned by the colonial government as per their policies. Whatever the background, but their contributions towards the Assamese literature and language and as well as Assamese society was not forgettable not only then but today also. This paper will make significant contributions to the existing literature by analyzing contributions of Missionaries in the field of Assamese literature which is very significant.

Index Terms : Missionaries, Assamese Literature, Language, Development, Contribution

1. INTRODUCTION:

In the history of Assam and Assamese literature, the period of 19th century was specifically significant one. From the beginning of that century Assam experienced political, sociological and economical diminution and all of these situations contributed towards creation of another diminution called intellectual diminution. This ruined the healthy environment of Assam which was necessary for the creation of good literature. In these prevailing situations Christian Missionaries arrived at Assam. The contribution of Christian Missionaries towards the development of Assamese language and literature is noteworthy. The arrival of American Baptist Missionaries in Assam was not accidental or sudden happening; rather it was well planned by the colonial government as per their policies. Their policy aim was to convert the native people to Christian religion or Christianity with the help of their some amount of good effort in the form of the welfare. They know that only then their hearts will fill with gratitude towards Christian Missionaries and from this to the Europeans as well. Whatever the background, but their contributions towards the Assamese literature and language and as well as Assamese society was not forgettable not only then but today also. They added modern vision to Assamese literature by giving impartial perception which was fulfilled with religious and spiritual objects and also by adding western logical thinking.

2. Objective of the Study:

In this background the present paper has made an attempt to study the contributions of Christian Missionaries to Assamese language and literature. This paper will make significant contributions to the existing literature by analyzing contributions of Missionaries in the field of Assamese literature which is very significant.

3. Contributions of Missionaries to Assamese Literature and Language:

The year 1826 was most significant in the history of Assam as it is the year from which colonial era begun with the British control according to the 'Treaty of Yanndaboo' (1826). It is also the year at which 600 years old Ahom Kingdom was demised. Under British control, the ruling system of Assam, external environment, social tradition and values all are get changed. Not only this, even in the fields

of education and language also, significant changes were got noticed. In order to maintain the administrative system, British rulers imported a large number of subordinate officers and clerical staffs from Bengal as the local Assamese people were totally unfamiliar with the new administrative system. Newly employed Bengali office staffs reported Assamese language as underdeveloped and not an independent language and forced British rulers to permit Bengali as the official language in Assam. Since British did not follow any clear-cut language policy, therefore they easily accepted the request and announced Bengali as the official language in 1936. They disregarded the huge demand of the Assamese people and imposed Bengali language in schools and courts as well. In this critical time period, a few American Baptist Missionaries came to Assam which can be regarded as the fortune for the State. N.Brown, O.T.Cutter and M. Bronson are the names of the three Missionaries. As soon as their arrival in Assam in 1836, they started their work in favour of the development of Assamese language and literature. They realized that Assamese as the mother tongue of Assamese people is the best language for giving knowledge about Christian religion and it will be very helpful to attract and convert them in this religion. Therefore, they acquired a good knowledge about the local language 'Assamese' and started to write and also publish school text books in Assamese language but also created a war with the government to make them convince and replace Assamese as the official language in the place of Bengali. Few Assamese young people headed by Anandaram Dhekial Phukan supported and the Missionaries in this endless effort and their collective ceaseless effort got success and restored Assamese as the official language in 1873. Besides text books, the first Assamese Grammar and lexicon in this language was coming from the Missionaries. In 1839, Mr. W. Robinson published a grammar in Assamese language "Asamiya Bhasar Byakaran". Another grammar was written by Mr. N. Brown in 1848 titled as "Grammatical Notices of the Assamese Language". Mr. M. Bronson wrote a dictionary in Assamese and English named as "Assamese and English Dictionary" (1867) and published from the Baptist Mission Press, Sibsagar. Moreover, Mrs Cutter's contribution to Assamese literature, an English and Assamese lexicon was very significant. All these contributions make Assamese people more careful about their own language and literature as well as for their protection and development. Another

step which was taken by the Missionaries for the expansion of Assamese language was establishment of schools. In 1843, Dr. M. Bronson established a school in Nagaon. In the subsequent periods in many places of Assam, for example, in Sibsagar 6 schools were established with their efforts. In order to solve the scarcity problem in case of school text books, Missionaries wrote various textbooks like Barematara, Pratham Kitap, Sadhukatha, Pratham Ganana, Dutiya Ganana, Padartha Bidya etc. Establishment of printing press in Assam was another significant contributions made by the Missionaries. In 1831, Oliver T. Cutter established a press in Sadiya and after that on the efforts of Dr. N. Brown and O. T. Cutter; another printing press was established in Sibsagar in 1840. Many school text books and also Christian religious books were published after the establishment of Printing press. The most significant contribution of Baptist Missionaries to Assamese literature was the publication of magazine cum newspaper namely "Orunodoi" (1846-1882) meaning Dawn. It was the first magazine cum newspaper that fulfilled the intellectual needs of the Assamese people at that time (mostly during the first two decades of the existence of this magazine). The subject matter of this journal was both religious and secular and also includes the news or information both of Assam and worldwide as much as possible. The first edition of this paper, mentioned clearly the subject matter of this journal as – "The Orunodoi, A monthly paper, devoted to Religion, Science, and General Intelligence, is printed and published at the Sibsagar Mission Press, by O.T.CUTTER for the American Baptist Mission in Assam." The above mentioned words about subject matter of the paper were maintained from starting to ending time period. Many kind of literature like information about science, religious writings based on Christian Religion, writings for children, novel, travel articles etc. are expressed in 'Orunodoi'. Let us give some examples of writings that were published in the page of 'Orunodoi' –

- Books for Children – "Vugular Biwaran" (N.Brown); " Africar Konwar" (Mrs. Cutter); "Ramgatih Kahini", "Dharmik Soha", "Mauraa Sowali", "Eaglor baah", "Dharma and Bigyanor Kahini" etc. are significant.
- Religious Books on Christian Religion – Nathan Brown's "Yatrikar Yatra", and other writers "Muktir Baat", "Pandit aru Dharmaprasarok", "Josephor Kahini", "Baibelor Srishti" etc.
- Novel – A.K. Garni's "Olokeshi Beshyaar Katha", "Kaminikantar Charitra", Mrs. Garni's "Fulmoni aru Karuna" etc.

Not only this, Missionaries were giving their best efforts to remove superstitions belief from the society through their writings which were published in "orunodoi". They had tried to make the Assamese people conscious about the importance of education in human life and society through establishing schools. Besides N. Brown, O.T. Cutter and M. Bronson, some other Missionaries who have contributed to the Assamese Literature were A.K. Gurney, C.Barkar, A.H.Denford, M. Ward etc. Moreover few young Assamese men helped the Missionaries to revive Assamese language and literature. Among them Anandaram Dhekial Phukan (1830-1859) which was significant one, wrote and published many spiritual articles advocating the use of Assamese

language in schools and courts of Assam. "Asomiya Lorar Mitra" written by him clearly showed his unbounded true patriotism. An Assamese Christian known as Nidhi Levi Farwell published a number of poems and articles in "Orunodoi". He had translated Indian Penal Code from English to Assamese and a book on natural science from Bengali to Assamese.

4. CONCLUSION

The contribution of Christian Missionaries to the development of Assamese language and literature is noteworthy and will always remember. They not only contributed to the development of Assamese language and literature, but most significantly they created confidence as well as consciousness to keep their own literature and language under the protection and this was only their continuous efforts because of which Assamese language again got their own place by removing Bangla. They added many kinds of writings to Assamese literature and these had made Assamese literature rich. Therefore, their contributions to Assamese language and literature and also in changing social perspective always have been regarded as a great history which can't be forgettable.

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