

## **Education in Nineteenth Century Colonial Bengal : A Case Study of Primary Education in the District of Jalpaiguri**

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The British conquest of Bengal followed by the subjugation of the rest of the country confronted them with a new world, both in extent and character. With the aim of consolidating their hold over India, they proceeded very cautiously trying to understand the issues and problems that arose, in their own way. Political hegemony which was gradually established was followed by imperial cultural hegemony. In the colonial metropolitan interface this cultural hegemony was established through several ways; through the making of oriental scholarship that followed a vast recording, classification and codification; centralisation of the knowledge - production functions in the imperial metropolis and the function of knowledge transmission to which the institutions of education in the colony was restricted; and the marginalisation of pre-colonial educational institutions and knowledge systems. In this policy of cultural subversiveness, which was often under taken in very subtle manners, education became a tool. The role of education as an instrument of colonial hegemony is a recognised fact in historical research. This has been explored by several scholars like Martin Carnoy Philip Altbach and Gail P Kelly, Aparna Basu and Krishna Kumar <sup>1</sup>.

Initially the East India Company's Government took little interest in education; in fact its attitude was one of non-interference in religious and social matters. This was due to their feeling of insecurity stemming from their unstable position. Gradually as things became more definite the character of British rule changed; an era of consolidation of the Raj by the Company began from 1818. India as a colony, underwent fundamental transformation to make way for a structured colonial society.

As mentioned above the British, following policy of non interference, allowed the indigenous educational system to continue for quite sometime. No proposal was their for the establishment of a system of education under Government supervision and control.

The efforts made by Charles Grant, a civil servant of the Company, to persuade the House of Commons and the Court of Directors to introduce English in schools as a panacea for social abuses and moral degradation did not yield any result. Meanwhile the cause of education was taken up by the Christian missionaries. Their success in this field could not be ignored by the Government. The "introduction of useful knowledge and religious moral improvement" in the Charter of 1813, the setting up of the Committee of Public Instruction in 1823, the momentous decision to introduce English education and instruction through the medium of English in 1835 were important landmarks in the Company's attitude towards education that finally prepared the way for Wood's Despatch of 1854. A comprehensive and coordinated system of education from the lowest to the highest stage, with stress on mass education, female education and acquainting the great mass of the people with European knowledge through vernacular language, was drawn up.

While Calcutta and its suburbs were agog with these significant currents and cross

currents of events, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri, the norther boundaries of Bengal, were still in deep slumber. The new concepts that the British rule had introduced in the country has no impact whatsoever on these regions. Society here was unaffected by the spread of western education elsewhere in Bengal. The nineteenth century characteristics of Bengal had not the faintest trace here. The job-oriented educational system of the British had little to offer to the people of these regions.

In order to trace the development of education in Jalpaiguri it is essential that a brief sketch of the district be drawn. The district as an administrative unit came into being on January 1, 1869 by the amalgamation of Western Dooars, the area that was annexed to British Bengal from Bhutan in 1864, with the Jalpaiguri sub-division of Rangpur. The new district along with Darjeeling and Coochbehar was formed into a Commissioner's Division with head quarter at Jalpaiguri. It was known as Coochbehar Division. In 1875 the Rajsahi and Coochbehar divisions were amalgamated with headquarter at Jalpaiguri. Later in 1883, on the attainment of majority by the Maharaja of Coochbehar, it no longer formed a part of the division. Henceforth it was known as the Rajshai Division<sup>2</sup>.

The population of the entire district in 1872 was 418663<sup>3</sup>. By 1891 the number had increased to 681,352. This was almost entirely due to the introduction of the tea industry and the opening of railways. Once covered with dense, almost inaccessible forest, the tract became the focal point of migration from the neighbouring regions of Darjeeling, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Coochbehar and also from the districts of Bihar and Orissa. Many came in search of jobs as coolies in tea plantations; others as cultivators; the cheapness of land at Dooars, the facility with which crops could be sold at a good price, the opening of new roads and markets facilitating the development of trade and commerce attracted the outsiders to come and settle here. Jalpaiguri town began to grow in importance with different categories of people flocking to the district. There were the Government service holders, private individuals, merchants, traders and bankers, the professional class, artisans, jotedars, landholders, planters and as already mentioned, labourers<sup>4</sup>. Among the immigrants were a few Brahmins, Kayasthas and Hindus of other castes who made this land their home<sup>5</sup>.

## II

While making a general survey of educational development in Jalpaiguri one would find that the progress of education here was slow, halting and inconsiderable. The district had more or less the same story to tell as the other generally backward regions of North Bengal. The Western Dooars was particularly barren in this respect. While communicating with the Bengal Government in 1871 the Commissioner of the Coochbehar Division, Colonel Haughton, spoke of the total absence of schools in the Dooars<sup>6</sup>. Haughton felt that even with available funds it would take a long time to induce the people of this region to be interested in education<sup>7</sup>. Only a fraction could read and write. The complaint was not uncommon among the well-to-do jotedars of the Western Dooars that education made their boys too sophisticated for their simple way of life; for those who learned to read declined to handle the plough<sup>8</sup>. The position remained unaltered, for in 1872-73 the Deputy Commissioner of the Division voiced the same opinion when he said education has been very backward in this district<sup>9</sup>.

An enquiry into the state of affair at that time will reveal the reasons behind it. The living pattern of the people residing in the district, particularly in the Western Dooars was mainly responsible for this. The people did not live in villages but in scattered solitary hamlets<sup>10</sup>. Their

economy could be described as an island economy, the motivating force of which was self-sustenance. Surplus production was absent. Such conditions continued unchanged till demographic changes and consumer culture began to make deep inroads into their society. Under such a setting indifference, if not complete apathy, was nothing surprising. Lack of population concentration in one particular area made the choice of location of school difficult. The distance that had to be covered to reach the schools, particularly in the Dooars, proved to be another big obstacle. Moreover, the population being mainly agricultural little importance was attached to the value of education. Young boys and girls were indispensable for multifarious activities both at home and in the fields; hence the reluctance on the part of the parents to send them to school. Thus, poor socio-economic conditions with hand to mouth existence, made education a luxury that they could hardly afford.

The absence of wealthy upper class deprived the districts of the possibilities of rich and well to do patrons of education. This could very well be another cause for obstructing the growth of education in the district. Jalpaiguri drew almost a blank in this respect when compared with the neighbouring Rajsahi Division. Rani Sarat Sundari and Coomar Paresh Narain Rai of Pootea, Mohammed Rashid Khan of Natore, the Raja of Dighapatia had distinguished themselves by their liberality and generosity in promoting education in their respective places. Except for the Raikats of Baikantapur there were no resident zamindars of any importance in Jalpaiguri. The population being composed mainly of Rajbansi, Koch, the aboriginal tribes, Mech, Toto, Garo in the Dooars and of a very humble class of Mahamnadens holding small jotes<sup>12</sup>, education was naturally a far cry here. The Rajbansis, whether Hindus or Muslims were less advanced than the people of central or eastern Bengal.

The absence of a normal school for the training of *pandits* here was another cause for educational backwardness in this region. Commenting on the lack of competent teachers, and a problem which had almost become a chronic one, the Commissioner of the Division cited it as one of the main reasons for preventing the extension of schools. It was not till 1876 that all the districts of Rajsahi Division - Jalpaiguri, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Bogra, Malda - except Darjeeling had a Government normal school<sup>13</sup>.

Added to these were the defective system under which education was controlled here. Colonel Haughton had apprised the situation very correctly when he pleaded the need of the civil officers and local committees to exercise control over the acts of the officers of the education department. Harmony and cooperation between local authorities and departmental officers were essential for the successful working of the system.

### III

Any attempt to probe into the growth and development of primary education has to be done in the context of the generally backward conditions discussed above. While *pathsalas* flourished in the several districts of southern Bengal, they were practically unknown in Jalpaguri. Nothing is available about the existence of any elementary type of education prior to the formation of the district in 1869. "I am not aware of the number of schools existing before 1866"<sup>14</sup>. wrote Colonel Haughton in 1869. Usually persons in good circumstances belonging to higher castes set up and supported the village *pathsalas*; the people contributed little to their cost. Again, as in the more advanced districts of Bengal the *gurus* themselves established *pathsalas*. The social conditions prevailing in Jalpaiguri in the seventies of the 19th century precluded both these possibilities. Jalpaiguri however, like other districts of northern Bengal, e.g. Rajsahi, Rangpur,

Bogra, Malda, Dinajpur were soon to feel the impact of the improved *pathsala* scheme that was undertaken in Bengal in the seventies of the nineteenth century. The circumstances under which the new *pathsala* scheme was introduced cannot be understood without reference to Government's policy towards primary education in Bengal.

Wood's Despatch of 1854 spoke of education from the lowest to the highest stage. So primary education was very much in the scheme of educational pattern that was introduced. Primary education during the British days had certain characteristics. It was different from both higher and secondary education; the former was adapted to the wealthy and talented seeking for careers in professions, the latter was suited to those engaged in trade, business and less lucrative office works. By primary education was meant that education which could be advantageously offered to the lower classes, the agriculturists, day labourers and artisans. A true primary school was a school to which the lower classes sent their children without the expectation that they would rise to "the middle classes"<sup>15</sup>. However the Government failed to keep its promise of educating the masses through their own vernacular. Negligence on the part of the Government in this respect was pointed out by the Secretary of State in 1859 while reviewing the results of the Education Despatch of 1854. Something in this direction had to be done and was ultimately done in 1860 when the *Pathsala* Scheme was introduced and the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Sir J. P. Grant, added Rs. 30,000 to the education grant for the year, with instructions to utilise the money for the improvement of *pathsalas* in the country. All responsibilities were vested on Bhudev Mukhopadhyaya's independent charge in 1862. Unfortunately the great purpose of educating the lower agricultural classes was soon lost sight of. No longer was there the desire to improve the indigenous *pathsalas* and encourage the *guru* but to remove him in favour of a man belonging to a higher class with better education. The rate of stipend was fixed at Rs. 5 per month. The result was that these new *pathsalas* which were originally meant for those belonging to the lower strata of society were at once taken possession of and monopolised by the *bhadralok* classes who stood higher in the social scale. There was however not the least reaction from the masses, they remained almost as untouched as before<sup>16</sup>. Against these *pathsalas* stood the *pathsalas* of J. Campbell, which aimed at the encouragement and development of a truly indigenous system. Here the aim was not fit on to the general system at all but to teach the village boys to take care of their own interests in the different stations of life to which they belonged<sup>17</sup>.

Both these types of *pathsalas* were introduced in Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling and other districts of Northern Bengal. Campbell's scheme of primary village school fulfilled their purpose here better than elsewhere.

In 1874-75 there were sixty *pathsalas* with 1342 pupils. The inspector Bhudev Mukherjee spoke of the popularity of these schools. The Sub-Inspector Ramchandra Bhowmik, whose sincere efforts were mainly responsible for the establishment of these *pathsalas* in the Dooars, spoke of their success<sup>18</sup>. By 1876 the Dooars had *pathsalas* in Mynaguri, Changmari, Alipur, Bhatibari and Haldibari. The Rajbansis living in the Dooars availed themselves of these primary school and also the middle class English school at Falakata<sup>19</sup>.

The Commissioner of the Division, W. Herschell remarked in 1874 that the *pathsala* system was well established in Jalpaiguri, a large part of financial support was given by the Coochbehar estate. The main reason for whatever success that was achieved was because there were in this district far few persons of the literate class than elsewhere. In 1876 there were in Jalpaiguri district 300 Brahmin families, 587 Kayasthas and 82 Baidays<sup>20</sup>.

It was these *pathsalas* and not the Government model vernacular schools or the aided middle English and vernacular Schools or Anglo-Vernacular Schools of the district that the poorer classes including the tribals attended. They were instructed in the simple and useful branch of learning i.e. a knowledge of accounts and instructions in reading and writing. This was more useful to the villagers than a smattering of grammar, geography, geometry etc. In fact such a scheme of education was not appreciated or approved by the simple village folks. Incident of parents of ten students withdrawing their children from vernacular school and placing them under the tuition of village *sircars* who instructed them only that was useful in their day to day life<sup>21</sup>, was reported by the Commissioner in 1871. As a rule Government directives with regard to the subjects to be taught in *pathsala* was adopted; nothing apart from the 3 rs were to be taught. Any attempt by any ambitious *guru* to qualify boys for scholarship examination, was to be checked at once<sup>22</sup> that was the Government directive. There was however a dark side to the story; a boy with exceptional intelligence and little or no opening was deprived of an opportunity for contesting in the vernacular scholarship examination for there was no rule to prohibit a lad from the *pathsala* to appear for such an examination.

The Deputy Commissioner of the district made an effort to provide the Mechs, a bright intelligent tribe, with some means of education. The problem was that they had no written language and their number was too small to instruct them in their spoken vernacular. Under such circumstances it was his suggestion that they be taught in Bengali since the language was understood by them. In an attempt to create a taste for learning a proposal was made for the establishment of one or two experimental schools in selected Mech locality during 1873-74. These efforts bore fruit. By 1877 they gradually began to understand the advantages of education. A very encouraging feature was the presence of some of them in the Normal School where they underwent training for the post of gurus in primary schools<sup>23</sup>. Reporting on the state of primary education in Jalpaiguri, the Inspector of schools, Bhudev Mukherjee spoke of some Mech schools that were opened<sup>24</sup>, the locations of which however cannot be traced. Later reports (of 1887-88) confirm the existence of three Mech schools with thirty four pupils<sup>25</sup>. A school for the Bhutiyas had also been established at Buxa with eleven pupils<sup>26</sup>.

From the available records<sup>27</sup> the emerging pattern of the educational developments in the district can be traced. A positive sign of progress can be noticed. Between 1870-71 to 1881-81 the *pathsalas* had increased from 47 to 117 with the students increasing from 768 to 2671 respectively. In 1881-82 the number of *pathsalas* decreased to 113 with student strength at 2720. The population in 1881-82 was 582, 200. Thus the number of boys actually at school compared with the number of boys of school going age taken at the usual rate of 15% of the male population was rather small. Between 1892-93 and 1899-1900 the number of *pathsalas* and that of the pupils had increased from 250 to 418 and from 5768 to 9963 respectively. Considering the population strength these figures were very low. The Rajbansis and the Mohammadens, even towards the end of the century gave little attention to the education of their children. The complaint that education eventually turned their children from agriculture still lingered<sup>28</sup>. The census return of 1891 gave the total population figure at 680736, of this 285,704 were illiterate. But this position altered gradually. This was proved by the establishment of primary schools by the jotedars themselves. the Mynaguri tahsil jotedars' Union Fund had spent Rs. 2,740 between 1890 and 1894 for opening a model English school at Mynaguri and primary schools at Changmari, South Mynaguri for jotedars' children. The Falakata Jotedar's Union Fund had spent Rs. 600 between 1889 and 1894 for the maintenance of Falakata Primary Schools<sup>29</sup>.

The Government had introduced a system of high fixed grants in this district. Earlier in 1877-78 payment by results had been introduced. In 1880-81, in addition to the system of fixed stipends a system of rewards on the result of the lower vernacular scholarship examination was introduced.

Both upper and lower primary schools received grants from the Government. In 1878-79 this grant amounted to Rs. 4000<sup>30</sup>. It increased with the passage of time, the amount being raised to Rs. 17,204 in 1899-1900<sup>31</sup> with the corresponding increase in the number of schools.

The number of candidates sent for scholarship examination was few. In 1880-81 only 43 out of 117 primary schools sent 104 candidates of whom only 31 passed. In 1884-84, 154 candidates were sent from 61 schools, of whom 49 passed. At the Upper Primary Scholarship examination 31 candidates from 12 schools appeared, only 10 were successful<sup>32</sup>.

A few words on female education must be said to make the picture complete. Female education in Jalpaiguri was in its infancy in the 19th century. An allowance as an incentive was given to the *gurus* at the rate of 4 annas per head for teaching girls. Despite this fact there were just two girls' schools in the district in 1886-87<sup>33</sup>. The spread of female education was checked when the monthly allowance to the gurus was withdrawn in 1888-89<sup>34</sup>. The figures given in the Annual General Administrative Report, Rajsahi Division 1889-90 show that there were only 182 girls attending the boys schools<sup>35</sup>. Any account of female education in Jalpaiguri will remain incomplete without a reference to Munshi Tarukoolla Sahib of Boda. An honorary magistrate he had distinguished himself for his zeal in the cause of education, particularly female education. The Boda adult girls school along with another school there owed their existence to his initiative and enterprise. Co. Haughton, while submitting a report on the progress of education in the Coochbehar Division in 1871, rightly commented, with a few more Tarukoolla Mushis the district would have worn a different aspect from what it does at present<sup>36</sup>. The Deputy Commissioner of Rajsahi Division was not much wrong when he remarked in 1887 that in a district where the majority of the people belonged to the labouring and cultivating classes nothing could be done by local effort for the advancement of female education<sup>37</sup>.

The overall progress of primary education in particular and education in general in the district and elsewhere will help us to comprehend the situation better. In 1869, the year from which progress of education can be traced, there were just 6 school with 282 pupils<sup>38</sup>. The number rose to 16 with 600 pupils in the next two years. Between 1872 and 1875 a marked increase in the number of schools could be noticed; this was due to the patronage extended by the Maharaja of Coochbehar who had large estates in Jalpaiguri. Even then the percentage of schools to population remained considerably low. In 1877-78 it was .04. Condition in the other northern districts of Bengal were not promising either<sup>39</sup>. The percentage of boys at school to boys of school going age was also not bright in the district. It was 7.81 in 1880-1881. In 1884-85 Jalpaiguri along with Darjeeling was lowest in the scale with 8-10%; while it was 55.6% at Hooghly, 52.6% at Howrah, 43-45% at Burdwan, Midapur and 24 Parganas and 28-36% at Bankura, Dacca, Mymensingh & Faredpur<sup>40</sup>. In 1890-91 it was 15; a slight improvement was seen in 1896-97 with 18.6. By the end of the century i.e. 1898-99 the percentage stood at 19.8. Compared to the advanced districts of Calcutta (64.1), Hooghly (56.1) Midnapur (61.0), in the same year, Jalpaiguri along with other northern districts were miserably trailing behind<sup>41</sup>.

That some progress was made cannot be denied. The education return of 1884-85 mention 57 primary schools with 1299 pupils had attained the scholarship standard; while 155

schools with 2682 pupils were below it but used printed books<sup>42</sup>. The situation improved by 1887-88 when 139 schools with 3213 pupils attained the scholarship standard.

#### IV

In conclusion it may be said that speaking in a very general way there was the want of zeal in dealing with education in Jalpaiguri. The apathy of the people was to a great deal responsible no doubt. A district, chiefly populated by agricultural and labour class, was not expected to respond in a very positive way to education. The problem however lay deeper. The primary education in Jalpaiguri district was meant mainly for the lower classes and the tribals who formed a large segment of the population. The education that was imparted to them was an implanted education, with no reflection on their language, their culture or their way of life. The reluctance of parents to send their boys to school, for once they learnt to read they would decline to handle the plough, was not without basis. Such an education made them aliens in their own homes and did not help them to adjust in their society. Adoption of the values of dominant British culture both in its curriculum content and processes created a disequilibrium. This was difficult for the tribals to accept. They were afraid that such an education would alienate them from their cultural moorings and their tribal identity.

The indifference on the part of the Government was also responsible for the educational backwardness of this region. Education was to be used as a tool for the establishment of Western cultural hegemony in which the participation and involvement of the upper classes of the Indian society was envisaged ; the masses had little role to play in this scheme. Official apathy to the educational claims of the lower and backward classes is a recognised fact. Primary education, particularly in the northern districts of Bengal, was greatly neglected. The case of Darjeeling affords a good example. Here, practically little was done to improve the socio-economic conditions of the people through education. Not till the arrival of the Christian Missionaries that any progress in this direction was really made. The Government was too happy to leave the entire primary education in their hands. The rest of the districts here in the north had more or less the same story to tell.

Another important point is to be raised before coming to the end of the discussion. Were the English educated Indian professional occupation groups, enjoying a monopoly in holding positions in the lower rung of the colonial structure, in favour of extension of educational facilities for the underprivileged communities ? This is an issue that demands further investigation. But the fact remains that as mentioned above, the new *pathsalas* of the 1860s, originally meant for the lower sections of the society were encroached upon by the '*bhadraloks*'. Even in the northern districts the tendency was to attract to the *pathsalas* boys of classes superior to those for whom they were intended<sup>43</sup>.

Primary education, we may conclude, was still at a low ebb in the district at the end of the 19th century. Government help did come in the form of limited financial aid but much was left to be done. Non Government agencies did contribute towards its development, but in a meagre way. Despite the educational efforts made by the Government and by private individuals in a limited way the question remains as to how far did it serve the interest of the original inhabitants of the region, the Rajbansis, Koch, the Mech, and the Totos ? Or how far did it benefit the people belonging to the lower strata of society ? A little more care and insight, a little more understanding of the problems of this district could have yielded better results.

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