

I N T R O D U C T I O N

The object of this study is to make an enquiry into the growth and development of the system of education in certain areas of the northern regions of West Bengal. The work has been confined to the three northern most areas of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar so that the thesis may be kept within reasonable limits. The two other districts of Malda and West Dinajpur, on which ample materials are available, will be taken up at some later date for a separate study.

Any exercise in intellectual discipline needs a justification for its existence. An attempt has been made in this thesis to bring to light a hitherto neglected area of study. Several works on the social and educational development of 19th century Bengal have been made. But no detailed enquiry seems to have taken place on the nature and development of education and its effect on the society in the districts of northern Bengal. The present work, is expected to bridge a gap in the available literature, by making a careful enquiry to discover new informations and verify existing knowledge.

A vital problem like education should be studied against the background of political, economic and social conditions, which influence its growth and development. The love for learning had an early origin in this country which can well be proud of an ancient and glorious cultural heritage. This scholastic spirit, though interrupted by successive invasions and penetrations through the ages, was not totally eclipsed.

When the East India Company appeared on the political scene of India the country was in complete disarray following the weakening of the Mughal central authority. The East India Company was primarily a trading company; but by 1792 it had been able to consolidate

its position in the country as a political power. It could then turn to administrative and educational measures.

The gradual introduction of English in the Indian system of education by the East India Company's Government was destined to bring about far reaching changes in the socio-economic texture of Indian society. The education policy was part of the programme to consolidate British rule in India. The dissemination of English education would create a class of Indians full of warmest praise for western culture and thought and thereby assist British colonial imperialism to take deep roots in the country to the detriment of Indian culture and education. Their advocacy of English education was also influenced by financial and administrative considerations. Engagement of Indians in subordinate posts would mean economy in administration. Besides, a demand would be created for English consumer goods by the western educated youth.

The process of introducing English education first began in Bengal, but one should take note of the fact that it did not spread uniformly all over the province. The northern part of Bengal remained isolated from the mainstream of events the reason for which is to be sought in the psychological, social, ethical, financial and political factors.

The Rajsahi and Coochbehar Division which incorporated, among others, the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and the princely State of Coochbehar (due to the minority of the Raja), was the vast and fertile tract between the Ganga and the Himalayas; This was a land of contrast; the scorching heat of the plains mingled with the cool, salubrious climate of the mountains, the tropical vegetation gradually receded to give way to the tea gardens and pine forests of the Himalayas. With its diverse culture, language, creed, its varied

Morphology and landscape this region was very different from the rest of the province. The presence of various tribes - the Lepchas, Bhutias in the hills and the Mech, Bodo and Rajbansis in the plains together with the Nepalis, made life here very colourful and fascinating. Till it came to be connected by roads and railways in the eighties of the nineteenth century these regions of north Bengal were isolated more or less from the rest of the province. The district of Darjeeling, the result of British annexation of hill tracts from India's neighbours, is relatively modern. So was Jalpaiguri which was formed into a district in 1869.

The two districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri and the State of Coochbehar, which is the subject of this thesis, were backward when compared to the other regions of Bengal. The new concepts and ideas that British rule had introduced in the country seemed to have no influence in this part of the country. The Bengal Renaissance, which was the result of the impact of British rule and modern western culture, did not touch this region. Society here was unaffected by the changes that were being brought about by the spread of western education elsewhere. The ambience of Calcutta, the metropolis of British India and commercial and political capital of the country, was hardly perceptible here. The 19th 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. Except for the tea industry in Darjeeling and the Dooms of Jalpaiguri, which attracted vast number of labourers from the adjoining regions, there was nothing here that could promote the growth of a socially and intellectually conscious middle class. The Government employees who came here on appointment left the region soon after the completion of their tenure. They had no roots here that

could generate the growth of a healthy middle class. The total absence of the upper and middle classes created vacuums in the social structure. This was particularly evident in the district of Darjeeling. The picture was a little different in Jalpaiguri. Here immigrants from the neighbouring districts of Rangpur, Pabna etc. made the district their home. From this group were to emerge the middle and upper sections of Jalpaiguri's society. But this was a long drawn process, stretching from 1869 to the end of the century; its effect could not be immediately felt.

Darjeeling provided a virgin soil for the Christian missionary activities. Here the edifice of the Church of Christ was erected slowly. The toils and sacrifices of the Church of Scotland did not go in vain. They succeeded in establishing several schools for the hitherto neglected people of the hills.

Jalpaiguri, with a population that consisted mainly of the agricultural and labouring classes, had more or less a similar story to tell. Here too educational progress was slow.

Coochbehar being a native State had a different political and administrative set up. It no doubt had a cultural tradition but educationally the Rajbansis of Coochbehar trailed far behind the people of Bengal. That is why, in spite of the employment potential of the princely State, all the administrative posts were held by the Bengalis of British Indian territory. The Maharajas of Coochbehar patronized education. The spectacular development of education in the last few decades of the nineteenth century was solely due to the great interest taken by Maharaja Nripendra Narayan.

On the whole, the period under study was characterized by ignorance, illiteracy and social isolation of the people. Here the downward filtration theory that education must percolate down from

the top to the lowermost regions was unworkable. Education here had to be brought to the very doors of the ignorant masses. The vast majority of the people here belonged to the agricultural class who were as the Report on Public Instruction of 1863-64 said, "too poor to get up schools for themselves or too ignorant to care much about education." They had neither the means nor the inclination for developing any appreciation for it. This explains the existence of only a handful of middle English and middle vernacular schools, and with the sole exception of the Victoria college, there was no institution for higher education.

North Bengal was and still is a rather backward and neglected area. In the subsequent chapters several problems relating to education in Darjeeling, Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri have been investigated. The extent to which education had spread in the 19th century, the impact of its development on society, the reasons for its apathy to the deep stir caused by the establishment of British rule in Bengal, the efforts of the Christian missionaries to exploit the situation; their educational activities and the results, the efforts on the part of the Government and individuals to enlighten the masses - all these and various other correlated questions have been investigated in this work.
