Contributions of Nathan Brown to Assam

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The activities of Christian missionaries in India evoke both appreciation and criticism. Among the missionaries in Assam, Reverend Dr. Nathan Brown stands out for his valuable contribution to Assamese language and literature. He was instrumental in establishing the first printing press in Assam, which ushered in a new literary development in the region. With Sibsagar (Sivasagar), on the banks of the Dikhow River, as his base, he carried on various activities. Brown admired the Assamese language and went around teaching, translating and preparing books in Assamese. The credit of publishing the first Assamese Grammar book in 1848 and a part of the Bible in pure and simple Assamese goes to him. He was also a pioneer in writing school books. He wrote books on elementary Arithmetic and Geography which were much superior to Bengali books used in schools at that time. In all his pursuits, his wife Eliza, who was a translator in her own right, ably assisted him. The magnum opus of Brown was the news magazine “Orunodoi”, which was the first of its kind in Assamese. Brown was also a pioneer in the unearthing of old manuscripts and in editing and publishing them. The singular most important contribution of Nathan Brown to the Assamese society was his struggle to restore the Assamese language as the court language as well as the medium of instruction in Assam, which was realized in 1873.

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The activities of Christian missionaries in India are both appreciated and criticised. They are often accused of destroying the traditional culture of native people. Whatever the criticism may be, the contributions of missionaries for betterment of society cannot be overlooked. One is reminded here that Reverend Dr. Nathan Brown played a very significant role in the history of Assamese language and literature. It will be worthwhile to remember him on his 201st birth anniversary as he was born on June 22, 1807 in New Ipswich in the state of New Hampshire in US. He graduated from Williams College in 1827 holding the highest position in the class. He married Eliza Ballard on May 5, 1830. For a few years, he was Associate Principal of Bennington Seminary and editor of a weekly newspaper called The Vermont Telegraph. He attended the Newton Theological Institute in order to prepare himself for missionary work. He graduated in 1832. The American Baptist Missionary Union appointed him as a missionary to Myanmar in 1833. Having greatly contributed to the literary and spiritual life of the people in Myanmar within a short period, he headed for Assam upon the request of Captain Francis Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam. This request was made to launch the Shan Mission aiming to help the British administration to enlighten, refine and educate the warrior tribes of Shan, Khamtis and Singphos. Brown and his associate Oliver Cutter along with their printing press sailed to Calcutta.
After a stopover in Calcutta, they set out for Sadiya by river. A long, tiresome and dangerous trip by a country boat brought them to their destination, i.e., Sadiya on March 23, 1836.

With the establishment of the first printing press in Assam, Brown’s arrival ushered in an era of literary development in the region. Due to inadequate assistance from the Mission and due to tribal aggression in Sadiya, Brown had to shift his base to Jaipur near Naharkatiya in 1839 and then to Sibsagar in 1843. He found Sibsagar to be the most suitable place for his missionary work. There, making his base on the bank of Dikhow River, he worked until 1855. Towards the end of 1844, Brown travelled on foot from Sibsagar to Guwahati, visiting villages to study personally the diverse cultural and racial characteristics of the people. He along with two other missionaries, Miles Bronson and Cyrus Barker, organized and founded the first Baptist church at Panbazar in Guwahati on January 25, 1845. Brown also pioneered in establishing schools in different parts of the state. He established 14 Assamese medium schools in and around Sibsagar by 1846.
Brown was a linguist par excellence. Very soon he could master Assamese and appreciated the
beauty of this language. Brown admired the Assamese language; its open, agreeable vocalization,
its picturesque Sanskrit characteristics and its quaint inflections and idioms became native to
him. He was deeply involved in teaching, translating and preparing books in Assamese. He
translated and published a catechism in Assamese. A good number of his translated hymns are
still sung in many churches in Assam. In 1848 he published, *Grammatical Notes of the Assamese Language*, which served as the first Assamese Grammar book. In the introduction of this book, he wrote, “For beauty and softness, the Assamese language is much superior to the Bengali”, showing his keen love and appreciation of this language. Brown found that the Assamese Bible published by William Carey, which was in circulation at that time, was full of Bengali and Sanskrit terms, so it was idiomatically inadequate. Therefore, he undertook to translate the Bible and published the New Testament into pure and simple Assamese in 1848. Brown was also a pioneer in writing school books. He wrote books on elementary arithmetic called *Pratham ganana* (1845), *Dutio ganana* (1855) and geography called *Bhugulor biboran* (1851) which were much superior to Bengali books used in the schools at that time. He translated John Bunyan's famous *Pilgrims Progress* into Assamese. Brown's wife, Eliza, opened a boarding school for girls. She was also actively involved in literary work. She translated a dozen tracts into Assamese and wrote arithmetic and story books for children.

The magnum opus of Brown was *Orunodoi* which means 'the dawn'. It was the first news magazine in Assamese published from Mission Press, Sibsagar, beginning from January 1846. Brown did the editorial work whereas Cutter was involved in printing and publishing the magazine. The print line of the magazine stated: "THE ORUNODOI, A monthly paper, devoted to Religion, Science, and General Intelligence, is printed and published at the Sibsagor Mission Press by O.T.Cutter, for the American Baptist Mission in Assam." The columns of the magazine brought various news from all corners of the globe. With illustrative articles on science, geography, astronomy, history and many other topics it soon found an encouraging readership among the Assamese intelligentsia and thereby paved the way for Assamese journalism. Many Assamese scholars like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Baruah and Hemchandra Baruah also contributed articles in this magazine that became a launching pad in the struggle for restoration of Assamese language. Brown was the editor of this magazine till he left for US. After Brown, the *Orunodoi* was in circulation with occasional breaks until 1880. Following the example of *Orunodoi*, several newspapers and magazines were published in Assam in the second half of the 19th century. Prominent among these were *Asam Bilasini*, *Asam Darpan*, *Asam Bandhu*, *Asam Deepika*, *Jonaki* and *Assam News*. Brown was also a pioneer in the unearthing of old manuscripts and in editing and publishing them. Under his able editorship, *Orunodoi* published history by bringing out the texts of old chronicles in properly edited form such as *Chutia Buranji*, *Purani Asom Buranji* and *Kamrupar Buranji*. Through his encouragement, some Assamese scholars published books. Among these publications Kashinath Tamuly Phukan’s *Asom Buranji* (1842) and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan’s *Asomia Loror Mitro* (1849) and *A Few Remarks on the Assamese Language and on Vernacular Education* (1855) printed at the Mission Press in Sibsagar are worth mentioning.

In 1836, the British rulers imposed Bengali as the court language as well as the medium of instruction in Assam. The justification of this imposition was that Assamese was thought to be a colloquial dialect and sub-language of Bengali. William Robinson, Inspector of Government schools, in his book *Grammar of the Assamese Language* published in 1839 stated that Assamese was identical with Bengali. Robinson asserted saying, “Assamese was essentially the same as Bengali”. Therefore his book could not be considered as the grammar of the Assamese language. Strangely, except a very few including Anandaram Dehekial Phukan, the Assamese people by and large did not protest this imposition. In contrast, Brown established that Assamese was a widely understood vernacular in Assam and that it was a language distinct from Bengali. Moreover, in contrast to the government, the schools founded by Brown and other Baptist missionaries used Assamese as the medium of instruction. Taking the legacy of Brown, Miles Bronson spearheaded the struggle for restoration of Assamese language until the battle was finally won in 1873.

Modern prose-style in Assamese literature to a great extent is credited to the work of Brown and other missionaries. The currently prevalent standard of Assamese has its roots in the language of Upper Assam, particularly of Sibsagar. Renowned Assamese littérateur Banikanta Kakoti notes, “The missionaries made Sibsagar in Eastern Assam, the centre of their activities and used the dialect of Sibsagar for their literary purposes”. Since the initial printing and literary activity occurred in Upper Assam, this language was introduced in schools, courts and offices and thus
came to be formally recognized as the Standard Assamese. Therefore the language which the
missionaries mastered, used and promoted through their literary works became the standard
language. Another well known Assamese literary figure Maheswar Neog states, "...but now in
contact with English speaking people Assamese developed modern prose-style; and this should
perhaps be considered the greatest contribution of the Baptists to Assamese literature and
culture. The everyday language of the people could now be the medium of literary expression,
which now began to imbibe the qualities of English rhythm and syntax". Language is the chief
ingredient of culture. The missionaries, rather than threatening Assamese culture, liberalized and
preserved it and helped in modernizing the language. Therefore, the historians have termed the
era of American Baptist Missionaries as a period of ‘cultural progress’ in Assam.

Due to ill health and certain problems in Home Mission, Brown, after 20 years of successful
service, left Assam on February 13, 1855 for US. His farewell note said, “One of the hardest
partings I ever experienced. If God in mercy restores my health so that I can again be useful, I will
return and labour for them till life ends, with all my heart.” Unfortunately due to some
unavoidable reasons he could not return to Assam, the land and the people that he so loved and
cherished. He joined in anti-slavery movement there. In 1872, Brown travelled to Japan where he
was deeply involved in translating the Bible into Japanese. Brown died on January 1, 1886 at
Yokohama in Japan. Brown was a scholar, linguist and philologist of international repute. The
people of Assam would ever remain greatly indebted to Brown for his unparalleled contributions
to the Assamese language and literature at a very crucial time of its history.

Fatal Apathy

C.F. Andrews was one of those foreigners who wished well of our country. He was a professor in one of
the colleges of England. But he passionately loved to serve the poor and the suffering. He had heard of
the political slavery and poverty of the Indians. He, therefore, came out to India and served her in
various ways till the end of his life.

Andrews was an intimate friend both of Mahatma Gandhi and Gurudeva Rabindranath Tagore. Because
of his great service to our country, our people gave him affectionately the title of “Deenabandhu” – a
friend of the poor.

When Andrews was a boy, one day he said to his father, “Father, looking at grandfather’s photo I feel he
is still alive and looking at us. By the by, what did grandfather die of?”

The father became serious. Tears began to trickle down his cheeks. After a while he said in a choked
voice, “Son, it is a sad story! No doubt your grandfather was old and so his health was indifferent. One
day he and I were walking along the pavement. Some thoughtless boy or a member of some family had
after eating the orange thrown the peel on the pavement. The Grandpa’s foot slipped on it and he was
hurt so badly that before long he died! Even today when I recall the incident, I am deeply moved.”

The father paused here and then resumed, “Son, ever since that day whenever I see the skin of a
plantain or the peel of an orange cast carelessly on the street, the fatal incident comes back to my mind.
Therefore, at once I pick it up and deposit it in the dustbin.”

This incident made a deep impression on the mind of the boy Andrews. And he also cultivated the same
good habit.

Source: Inspiring Anecdotes by Mukulbhai Kalarthi. Translated from the original in Gujarati by Gurdial Mallik.