

Facets of the North-east

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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Author

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.

অকনোদই সমাদ পত্ৰ।

প্ৰথম চোখা। মোং সিংনাথৰ, আনোআৰি ১৮৪৯ খ্ৰিষ্ট অৱ্দৰ্শক। ১ নম্বৰ।

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জোখা বচবৰ কথা।

Summary of Events in 1848.

১৮৪৪ ইং-বৰ্ষক ১ জানোআৰিৰ পৰা এচ-
ম্বৰে ভিতৰত ইংলণ্ড দেশত যাতে যাতে ২৩-
২৩ ০০ ০০০ টি টাকাক পঠোআ হ'ল।

১৮৪৫ৰ ৭ জানোআৰিত এক মেজাল ভবা
কলিকতাত সেবা হৈছিল।

২ জানোআৰিত মান দেশৰ পূৰ ফালে জল-
সাইন নামেৰে কলুনিৰ এক বৰ নগৰত জুই লা-
গি ১০০ বছৰ পুৰিলে।

মেজুটিকা দেশৰ চাৰিত্ৰানা নগৰে এক সে-
নাশক্তি সেই দেশৰ ৰাজ মেলাৰ বিৰোধে ১০ ০০০
সেনাই সৈতে বৰ লড়াই নিমিত্তে ১৪ জানোআ-
ৰিত ডাক ধৰি দেশান্তৰ কৰিলে।

৪ জেনোআৰিত লণ্ডন ৰাজ নগৰত খী-
স্ট্ৰীমতি এটা ৰানিৰ ৰাজ মেলা পাতিলে।

১৩ জেনোআৰিত কলিকতানগৰত জুই লাগি
অনেক ঘৰ পুৰিলে।

৪ হাত বহল, ৩৬ হাত দিহল, এনে বৰ দুৰি-
ৰা নামেৰে এজন লৰ্ড সাহাৰে সাজি ৪ মাৰ্চত
প্ৰথমে ডাক কুলি আকানলৈ চাই, কোন ভবা
জানি কৰি নকলোকে অতি ভাল ভাল হৈছিলে।

জিউতনা দেশৰ পৰা জি কেওনা বাপু লোকে
লঙ্কাত যৌতমা অৰীত বোম দেৱতাক সেৱা
কৰিটোং টোছিল, নিৰিনাকৰ আগত এক বীত
যৌতমাৰ দাঁত কুলি লঙ্কান বাপুৰ ১৪ মাৰ্চত বৰ্শন
কৰাল।

চুইত দেশৰ মানুহৰ ভিতৰত কাঞ্চিলা লাগি
বন কৰি, মাৰ্চৰ দেশ-অপ্ৰেলৰ প্ৰথম এই দুই নি-
বত দুই তিনি হেজাৰ মান মানুহ জৰিল।

৭ অপ্ৰেলত মেজুটিকা নগৰত বৰ জুইকণ
গল, তাতো নাম ঘৰৰ ২১ আৰু আন আন পকি-
ঘৰো অনেক জাৰি পৰিল।

১১ অপ্ৰেলত আমেৰিকা মিল দেশৰ পিছ-
বৰ্গ নামেৰে এক নগৰত জুই লাগি ১২০০ ঘৰ
পুৰিলে। ঘৰ বস্তু নখাৰে ২ ৪০০০ ০০০
টকা হানি হ'ল।

গ্ৰেইট ব্ৰিটন নামেৰে লোহাৰ এখান নকুন বৰ
আহাজ ৰাজ নগৰত ২২ অপ্ৰেলত মহা ৰানিক
পাতিলে গল। সেই আহাজ ২১৪ হাত দিহল,
জি অংশৰ কল লগোআ হৈছে, তাৰ ১০০০
ঘোৰাৰ পৰামি বন হৈ।

কাবুল কাছাৰে উঠৰ বোখানা দেশৰ ব-
জাই দু জন সাহাৰেক ধৰি বাৰিচে কুলি দুনি,
উলুভ নগৰে এক ইং-বেজি পাৰ্ছি সাহাৰে
আগৰ ৰাজত তালৈ গৈ বজাই সেই দুই সাহা-
ৰক ল'ৰা কামি, উলুভি আৰু অপ্ৰেল আহত ইং-
লণ্ড দেশ পঠিলে।

ফ্ৰিচা দেশৰ বজাই কেওটি দেশৰ পৰ্বতৰ লো-
কে সৈতে বৰ কৰিটোং ১ ৪০ ০০০ সেনা পাঠ-
ছিলে।

ইংলণ্ড দেশৰ ডাৰ্মত নগৰত এক বাৰিচনে
আমোৰ্ণিৰ নিমিত্তে এটা ৰহিয়া উমত সেলাই, টা-
নিটোল ৪ ৰাজ হাৰ লয়াই, পাচে চৰিকাৰ উট

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 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 Sibsagar 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 Dhekiel 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 Dhekiel Phukan's *Asomia Lorar 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 Dehekiel 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.

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- *(The writer was born in 1953 in Morabazar, Dist. Sivasagar, Assam. He was converted to Christianity through visionary experience in 1977 while serving as a school teacher in Molungkimomg in Nagaland. He has worked in Nagaland and Assam as mission worker from 1977, and is at present working as pastor of Guwahati Baptist Church, Panbazar, Guwahati. Aziz-ul-Haque has authored one book in English and seven booklets in Assamese, besides contributing articles to various news dailies. He may be contacted at azihaque@yahoo.co.in)*
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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. Published by Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. First edition, August 1957. Pages 22-24.